

Lent 1
1/3/2020

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 42:1-9
Psalm 32
Matthew 4:1-11

On seeing what is there

In a sentence

We must look to see how God has worked – say in Isaiah’s servant – to see how God works in Jesus.

If you were to give a child a pencil and ask her to draw a picture of a person’s face, the chances are high that she’ll draw a circle for the head, with eyes at the top of the head and the nose and mouth filling the rest of the space. Or, if you asked her to draw and colour a tree, it will almost certainly have a brown trunk and green leaves – in a single hue of brown and green.

She’ll do this because she ‘knows’ that this is what a face looks like, or how a tree is coloured. Of course, it is not only children who do this. Most of us realise pretty soon that our untrained drawing skills are fairly limited so we risk no more the taking up of pencils to draw but, if we dared, we would draw and colour much the same as innocents who don’t yet know that they ‘can’t draw’.

We draw and colour like this because we ‘know’ what things look like: eyes are at the top of the head and leaves are green. Except that they aren’t. There are good reasons for imagining that things are like this but we are wrong nonetheless. We have simply not paid enough attention to the world in which we live.

We need to be mindful of the distortions of unattentive ‘knowledge’ when we come to read the Scriptures. It is impossible not to bring some knowledge – or at least some expectation – to the Bible, but it always distorts what we see when we get to it. Those of us well-formed in Christian tradition bring to the Bible *thousands of years* of accumulated expectation: we *know* what we’ll find there.

The church has long ‘known’ the meaning of the readings from Isaiah we’ll consider over Lent. We have learned the connections between these prophetic texts and the story of Jesus. Again, there is good reason these links have been drawn. The work of the ‘Servant’ figure who appears in these texts resonates with accounts of who Jesus was and what he achieved:

‘Here is my servant...in whom my soul delights...I have put my spirit upon him’ (42.1);

‘But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed’.
(53.5)

If you wonder, How could those lines *not* be about Jesus?, the point is made. The connection to Jesus is obvious to a church which saw both what happened to him – ‘wounded’, ‘crushed’ – and experiences forgiveness and reconciliation from what happened to him – ‘for our transgressions’, ‘we are healed’.

And we need not doubt that obvious connection.

Yet there is much more to be seen here, and much more to know. The relationship between Jesus and the Servant is greater than the ‘conservative’ knows, who sees here a miraculous foreknowledge of Jesus. Such a reading would not allow that Jesus couldn’t have happened without Isaiah’s vision, but this then reduces the link between Jesus and the Servant to a happy coincidence across 500 years.

And the relationship between Jesus and the Servant is much deeper than implied by the dismissive claim of the progressive that the church has therefore misunderstood and hijacked a convenient text. For, even if Jesus doesn’t ‘require’ that Isaiah spoke as he did, we can’t *recognise* God in Jesus without some prior context, such as the Servant of Isaiah.

Oddly, then, we both *don’t need* Isaiah to understand Jesus, and yet *must* understand Jesus in terms of Isaiah. This is because what Isaiah says is not *necessary* for Jesus’ work; other things are present to help us recognise God in him. But the God Isaiah sees working in the Servant is the same God who is at work in Jesus, and so we should expect a connection. Our sense for God’s way in the world, then, will be much stronger if we look to see Isaiah’s Servant on his own terms, before *and as* we connect the Servant to Jesus.

This is not straightforward. We will see that the Servant is a very slippery figure. Sometimes the Servant is clearly *Israel itself* but other times the Servant is clearly *over-against* Israel, or *for* Israel. The slippage from the Servant which is *all of* Israel to the individual(?) Servant *for* Israel is probably deliberate but is also vexing. At the very least, we might come to see that God’s way with the world cannot be reduced to simple formulas or drawn with straight lines, or coloured with a single shade of green.

This matters for Christians because if it is not clear who or how the Servant is in Isaiah, it must be less clear *in what way* Jesus himself is the Servant. If Jesus is doing the kind of things Isaiah saw that such a God would do, we need to see what Isaiah saw if we are to know what Jesus did.

To come to see this will be our work over the next few weeks but, for now, there is another dimension of Isaiah’s preaching which is crucial to our reading of the Servant’s work. This is the nature of the God who is (co-)agent with the Servant.

Very strong in Isaiah – particularly these latter chapters – is the declaration of the absolute sovereignty of God. The work of the Suffering Servant is the work of the God who, as we heard this morning,

...created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,
who gives breath to the people upon it
and spirit to those who walk in it (42.5).

Isaiah sets God’s capacity to reconcile through the Servant’s *suffering* alongside God’s *creative power*, as *being of the same order*. If there is a link between the suffering of the Servant and that of Jesus, then the cross becomes – unexpectedly – a sign of *power*: a sign of the absolute sovereignty and creative power of God. It is *the cross* which parallels the creation of the world, and not the merely Easter Day resurrection, isolated as a miraculous wonder.

The cross is how God creates, or ‘now’ creates, ‘now’ brings righteousness to the world:

See, the former things have come to pass,
and new things I now declare... (42.9).

These are not ‘additional’ things; they are *new* things. New sight, new knowledge, which changes *how* we see, and so *what* we see. The former things, as what we ‘know’, must give way to the latter things – the cross, and God’s freedom in the cross.

This begins when we pay attention to what is before us, trusting not what we think we know but trusting eyes being trained to see. A child can be trained to see that, in fact, our eyes are in the middle of our faces, that a tree trunk is pink and purple and grey, and occasionally a *little* brown; that a leaf is greeny-yellow-white when it is not red or purple.

We do not see the world aright because we do not see God aright. Because we have not looked deeply into the God who is there, we do not believe that there is more to see in us and around us than we have noticed in fleeting glimpses.

Seeing God rightly begins with doing as God commands:

‘Behold, my servant’ (42.1, KJV),
[given] as a covenant to the people,
a light to the nations,
to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.

Behold *who you are*.

See *who is given* for you.

And discern *the God* who is in the midst of it all.

By the grace of God, may our eyes be opened to all this. Amen.

A prayer in response to the sermon

We bless you, O God,
You have created and sustained us
and all things for your own name’s sake, that we might glorify and enjoy you forever.

And yet we confess that, in thought, word and deed, we fail to bring you glory.

Forgive us when it does not occur to us that there is more to see of you and of those around us than we have seen till now.

Forgive us when, seeing more deeply we choose rather to be blind; when hearing more completely, we choose to be deaf.

Forgive us, then, selfishness, witting and unwitting; unkindness, intended and unintended; impatience we think was can justify, and which we cannot, despair because we have knowingly or unknowingly grasped the wrong hope.

Gracious God above all gods, Open eyes which are blind, bring captives out from the dungeon, and light to those who sit in darkness.

Make of us people for whom the past is past, and who are grounded in the new things you have promised.

Just so, gracious God, have mercy on us...