

Easter 6
17/5/2020

Mark the Evangelist

1 Peter 2:13-25
Psalm 66
John 14:15-21

The life in breaking the rules

In a sentence

God heals us by overcoming what is weak in us, and calls us to be healers in the same way

Do we not take offence at Peter's exhortations in the passage we have just heard? Perhaps even more difficult are the verses which follow from today's text, which – in the same vein as what is said to slaves – call wives to submit themselves to their husbands. Today we struggle to enforce human rights in relation to poverty and bonded labour, sex slavery, and gendered power dynamics within families and in wider society. And we scarcely hold that every civil authority deserves our humble submission.

Yet, Peter writes: 'humble yourself before every authority, slaves obey, wives submit'. There are a few things we need to clear out of the way if we are going to hear anything of the gospel in what Peter writes here.

First, Peter does not in any way *justify* the plight of slaves in that kind of economy, or of women in patriarchy. Certainly what he says has been interpreted in this way, and blasphemously so, as if social oppression were part of God's ordering of the world, or as if what a civil authority does is justified just because it *is* the civil authority at the time. Yet Peter himself does not mean that the prevailing order is *thereby* a just order.

Second, Peter is not addressing those who might be able to advocate for another whose plight is like that Peter describes. If we today imagine we see wrong we can right, Peter is not addressing us. Rather, he writes as one unable to do anything to change the circumstances of those he addresses, just as they can do little to change their circumstances.

Third, Peter is not laying out a general social or moral theory here. He is addressing Christians. These are likely mostly people of low status in their community; certainly they are persecuted. He appeals to them on the basis of what they profess – on the basis of how *Jesus* was in the world, and what God has done for them through Jesus. This is a word to Christians about the fact that they *are* Christians, and that this might matter for how they relate to others.

Central to our faith is that God does not work according to the patterns of the world. What is power in God's work does not *look* powerful to us. It doesn't look powerful because it doesn't operate within the power dynamics familiar to us. God's power is a power which moves *the world* rather than merely moving *within* the world. What moves within the world is merely creaturely. This is the power of the clever, the strong, the vigorous, the rich. But to move the world *itself* requires something from *outside*, a Spirit which moves over the chaotic deeps of our lives and brings light and life. Whatever powers operate *within* the chaos are subverted – the rules of such power are broken – and a new creation emerges.

If we were to characterise what Jesus does, we might say that he refuses to engage with the brokenness of the world by *means of the world's own brokenness*: Jesus does not deal with his opponents in the way that they deal with him. If indeed the crucified Jesus is Lord, then there can be no mistaking that this has nothing to do with his being clever or strong or sneaky or even merely lucky in the way that everyone else who claims lordship is. Jesus being Lord has nothing to do with the normal ways of the world; he does not 'overpower' the world in the way that gods are supposed to and so doesn't win in any way we would recognise as winning. (How is the crucifixion a victory, according to anyone's expectations on Good Friday?)

And yet, Peter's community – and ours – is built on the experience that something *is* won here. Though all the rules are broken, *we* are not. More to the point, *because all* the rules are broken, we are not. This is what we mean when we say, 'salvation by grace, not works': grace breaks the rules of work and reward, so that we should not be broken if we fall short of the righteous demands of the law.

Peter's call is to manifest in our lives what God manifests in Jesus' own life. Peter calls us to become the kind of rule-breakers Jesus is. This is different from the rule-breaking of the social reformer. According to the pattern of the world, today's radicals simply become tomorrow's conservatives, against whom the next generation of radicals will rage. It is against such unholy rage that Peter writes. If there is a rage for justice in Jesus' work, it is *holy* rage – a passion entirely *different* from the motivations and methods of the world to fix what is wrong.

For us to be 'holy as God is holy' (cf. 1.15f) is to do what and *how* God does. And so Peter writes, 'Honor everyone. Love the family of believers; have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind... Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing (2.17; 3.8f). Or, to sum it up in a word or five: 'submit yourselves to one another'. 'Arm' yourselves not with the power of the world but with the same intention by which Jesus himself lived: to let God be god, allowing *God's* creative way in the world to be our own, wherever we might find ourselves (cf. 4.1)

Peter addresses each of us in our situation – not only those who might be in a lowly place but also those more highly placed, as we usually measure such things. For us – low and high – to submit ourselves to circumstances which don't reflect God's demand for justice is not to declare those things right. Rather, this kind of submission makes present what the situation itself could not naturally produce: God's own subversive creativity.

The 'hard' justice we look for always *breaks* things – including us. God's justice, rather, is 'soft'. It is the unexpected creativity of mercy: God's turning toward us when we turn away, God's persistence with us when we are stubborn.

Whether we are lowly or powerful, to submit ourselves to one another is to enact this kind of soft justice. It is to present to each other a mercy which sets aside hard justice to build bridges, reconcile and re-connect what has been separated.

This is not the only way by which we might be in the world but, if the crucified Jesus is Lord, it is God's way.

Let it, then, be ours also.

Be holy as I am holy, says God, merciful as I am merciful.
