

Pentecost 5
5/7/2020

Mark the Evangelist

Romans 7:15-25a

Psalm 145

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

The revelation of sin by grace

In a sentence

Human sinfulness is something we really only grasped after we have been grasped by the grace of God, when sin is already behind us

The category of sin, which has been prominent in our readings from Romans over the last few weeks, is somewhat on the nose these days, even in the churches. The question is being asked quite seriously – have we not focussed too heavily on this? Ought we not to begin with original blessing and creativity, rather than with the somewhat dark and depressing idea of original sin and the corresponding need for redemption? Do we not frown too much we speak of human brokenness, and do we not sully God's name with all that scowling?

An honest answer to these questions would have to be 'Yes', for the most part. The fear of sin has manifested itself in witch hunts for sin in our lives or the lives of others. At the same time, with greater and greater clarity, we've come to recognise that many of the witch hunters have been at least as accomplished in sin as those they've pursued. And so, both from fear of hypocrisy and from sheer dissatisfaction with the idea that all human beings are born and die sinners, sin is often shifted into that room in the house which the guests never see, and which we rarely enter ourselves. It is still there, and we *know* that it's there, but out of sight is *almost* out of mind, and we imagine that that is good enough, all things considered.

Whatever good reasons we can give for this hesitation around the theme of sin, it has also to be said that, as much as ever, the church needs today a strong doctrine of sin because, without such a strong doctrine, we will only have a *weak* doctrine of salvation and so have very little to say which is actually worth hearing.

To illustrate where a weak doctrine of sin might lead us, let's consider what we've heard from Paul this morning:

I don't understand my own actions. For I don't do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate... I can will what is right, but I can't do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.

He continues:

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?

The answer he brings to that question is, *Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!* This might sound as if Paul reflects on just how hard it is to be good and then concludes: *isn't it great that Jesus makes a way through it all for us?!*

But this is a very weak doctrine of salvation which gives rise to the weak doctrine of sin we settle for too often these days. If Christ is merely a *help* through our inabilities or failures to deal with this or that challenge in our lives, *then he is only as relevant to me as I am weak*. The stronger I am, the less I need God in Christ. The measure of the work of God in Jesus Christ has now become my own weakness or strength. To the extent, therefore, that I live by the empowered creativity which comes with ‘original *blessing*’ (say), rather than am hindered by the darkness of ‘original sin’ – to just that extent, *I have no need* of God in Christ.

We *are* free, of course, to draw a general conclusion like that. Most of the Western world has, and much of the church with it. But we are *not* free to read Paul in that way if we want to hear what he has to say, rather than imposing on him what we *think* or *wish* he says.

In our readings from Romans over the last few weeks we’ve heard Paul put a couple of times the rhetorical question: ‘*Shall we, then, sin more that grace may abound more?*’ This was a charge which some had brought against his theology (3.8; 6.1,15). And it will be *justly* brought against any theology which concerns itself with an idea of sin as something which exists and can be understood apart from grace. We will imagine that more sin equals more grace if we think that grace is simply God’s ‘top-up’ over and above our sometimes weak, sometimes strong, efforts.

But the doctrine of sin is not about our being weak or naughty. We need a strong doctrine of sin because of the *extraordinary* power God has manifest in Christ. Unless God’s work *is* extraordinary, then the sin it overcomes will be nothing really worth commenting on.

And so, to be true to Paul’s method and proclamation, we have to say that the gospel is *not* the declaration that the doors of heaven are thrown open for those of us too feeble to push them open ourselves. *The gospel is that the doors of hell are ripped off their hinges,¹ so that those who did not even realise they were in hell might escape*. A torrent of quickening light floods in, dissolving the chains and revealing, *to those who had no idea they were shackled*, just what it meant truly to be enslaved by sin. This awareness of slavery to sin occurs *in the very moment that one is set free*. The depth, the darkness, the power of sin to enslave us is something we know only in the moment of liberation. To speak of sin to those who do not know that liberation will be to make no sense. And so also will it make no sense to speak of grace. *Only the saved know what sin is*.

Those of you familiar with my preaching will know that I’m not a great one for illustrations in sermons. This is partly because sermon illustrations get in the way as often as they help, and partly because I’m just not that imaginative.

But this one seems like it will help, and is silly enough to be memorable.

Paul’s experience, first of grace and then of sin, is like that of a chick just hatched from an egg. Paul is that little chick, who doesn’t really know he is in an egg until it is broken in pieces at his feet. Have you ever wondered what chicks say to one another when they’ve just hatched and are standing around cheeping away madly at anyone or anything which will listen? They’re saying something like this:

¹ Note the curious connection here with today’s OT reading: (to Jesus’ ancestor Rebekah) ‘...may your offspring gain possession of the gates of their foes...’ Genesis 24.60(-ish).

‘Wow, I never imagined the world was like *this*! Hey, can you *believe* what it’s like out here? Who could have guessed? I thought that old egg was OK but, *rooster*, this really rocks!’

Now, of course they say it all in chicken, but the translation is close enough. Paul *seems* to begin with a theory of sin and then drop Jesus in on top of it all. To be fair to us who misinterpret him, it is easy to read him this way: ‘*The wages of sin is death*, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus’. ‘*Where sin abounded*, grace abounded all the more’. ‘*Who shall save me from this body of death?* Thanks be to God in Jesus Christ!’

This all *reads* like a pessimistic theory of human existence is being prettied up by inserting Jesus into the picture. And, *because we can read Paul way*, when we reject his apparent pessimism we render Jesus only as relevant as we imagine ourselves to be broken – which can even be to render Jesus *irrelevant* if we think we’re pretty much OK.

But in fact, while Paul’s argument runs from sin in Adam to its treatment in Christ, his image of the sinful beginning is *revealed* to him by the *end*. Paul is only interested in the sin of Adam because he has experienced the gift which comes in Christ. He begins with the *salvation* he has known in Christ, and *this* reveals to him what he was like before the eggshell fell away. He doesn’t really notice sin until it is overcome.

Our doctrine of sin can only be as strong and well-defined as our experience of salvation. To turn that around makes it something quite shocking: a weak doctrine of sin reflects a poor experience of salvation. If we cannot speak strongly about sin, it is most likely because salvation has not figured strongly in our experience. Talk about sin then becomes little more than fearful moralism or its pendulum-swing opposite, optimistic wishful thinking. And neither of these is really worth hearing about and we do better – under those circumstances – to keep silent.

But, if Paul is right, we might also be set free to be honest about the ambiguity of our current experience of grace. We still confess that Jesus is Lord, for it is the very conviction that Jesus is Lord which has revealed that we have not yet known enough of grace to speak meaningfully of sin and so meaningfully of our *need* for grace.

And so we are also moved to prayer, for we cannot generate the experience of grace for ourselves. Grace is God’s gift of Christ to us in the power of the Spirit, and only God is the possibility that we might receive this gift. To understand what Paul speaks of here we must know the grace of God. Strangely, then, to see and understand sin, we must wait on God.

Let us then take God at his word,

prayerfully reminding him of the promises he made to Adam’s children through Abraham,

and waiting expectantly for the time when we too will marvel at what we see the God, the world and ourselves to be,
once the shell of sin is broken.
