

Pentecost 13
30/8/2020

Mark the Evangelist

Ezekiel 36:16-32a

Psalm 8

Matthew 16:21-26

For God's sake

‘Sticks and stones will break my bones but names will never hurt me’.

In this way we exhort our children not to take too seriously the mean things which might be uttered in the playground. What then are we to do with a God who seems to take too seriously the unkind things said about *God*?

^{36.20} ...when [Israel] came to the nations...they profaned my holy name, in that it was said of them, ‘These are the people of the LORD, and yet they had to go out of his land.’ ²¹But I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations to which they came.

²²Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name...

The point is driven home a couple of times in our present text, and we’ve also heard it before (Ezekiel 20).

To act for the ‘sake’ of something is generally to act for its benefit, to bring it direct or implied honour. Acting for ‘sake’, then, is also cast as a kind of sacrifice – something we didn’t have to do but did ‘for the sake’ of (whatever).

In Ezekiel, however, God’s action is explicitly – and with emphasis – for God’s *own* sake or, more specifically, for the sake of God’s ‘name’. In view of what we normally do in acting for the sake of something, this makes God’s motivation here seem self-involved, self-serving and so almost *petty*.

At the same time, the *effect* of this apparent self-interest *is* the restoration (or at least *promised* restoration) of Israel. This, surely, is not petty or self-interested.

From this, at least two possibilities emerge to account for what God says and does here. One is that the restoration of God’s people springs from God’s ‘vanity’. On this reading, God thinks, ‘They are saying nasty things about me’, and acts to improve God’s own reputation. If perhaps it seems not a little impious, this nevertheless works reasonably well as an explanation of why God moves from punishment and rejection to forgiveness and reconciliation.

The other possible motivation for God here, and one equally impious in a different kind of way, is that the being of God’s people is intimately and ineluctably, inextricably, linked to the very being of God. God’s concern with reputation is indeed petty for a god, *unless* God is who God says God is.

Important here is that God’s name is not like our names. ‘Sticks and stones will break my bones but names will never hurt me’ doesn’t apply to God. The ‘name’ of God is like the ‘appearance of the likeness of the glory of God’ we considered back in Ezekiel’s extraordinary opening vision (1.28). The name of God is as close as we can

get to God. It is a placeholder we use to mark where God would be if God is anywhere, a sign to wave if there were anything which could catch God's attention.

Our schoolyard chant distinguishes between us and our name – it is our bones which are really us, while a name is a mere label. But, for God, God's name *is* God's bones. The broken bones of God – the broken bones of God's body, Israel – amount to a kind of misnaming of God, a 'calling God names'.

Here we might also note that it is nothing Israel *does* in exile which causes the dishonouring of God. It is rather God's own action in bringing them into exile (36.20).

We arrive, then, at a deep mystery: The reduction of Israel is a reduction of God, by God's own hand. It is by both God and Israel that God is brought into disrepute among the nations. A restoration of God's reputation, then, *requires* a restoration of Israel, because this God survives the death of God's people and feels their loss.

This is not the impiety of suggesting God is vain but the impiety of tying God so closely to a particular historical people.

Ezekiel is not the first in the Scriptures to hold this impiety, and not the last. The last is the gospel of Jesus, in which a particular human being is condemned, and with him is also condemned before all the God whose kingdom he proclaimed and embodied. To utter another impiety – Jesus becomes, on Ezekiel's terms – something of a profaning of the name of the God he proclaimed: '*...let him come down from the cross now*', cry those who witness the crucifixion,

'and we will believe in him. He trusts in [']God[']; let [']God['] deliver him now, if he wants to...' (Matthew 27.42f)

But to pick up where Ezekiel goes with this: if God *is* who Jesus said God is, and if Jesus *had* the relationship to God his words and actions suggested, the resurrection is not an impossible 'miracle' but a matter of divine 'necessity', if God's name is not to continue to be mocked. The mockery of Jesus on the cross is the mockery of the God he proclaimed. The resurrection of Jesus is, then, 'for the sake of God's name'.

The upshot of all this is that whether condemned as Israel was for getting God wrong, or condemned as Jesus was for getting God right, hope lies not in *us* but in the God who's very being is tied to ours.

To have been chosen by God is to have had our lives tied to God's, such that we are now and forever more, 'for God's sake'. Wherever we find ourselves, the question of who we are and what we can look forward to as our hope is always answered with the name of God.

This is surely good news for anyone who suspects that their own name will not be enough to carry them over, and a challenge to any who imagine their name will suffice.

Let us then rejoice, or repent, as God's name and promise gives cause.
