

Pentecost 16
20/9/2020

Mark the Evangelist

Ezekiel 33:10-17
Psalm 145
Matthew 20:1-16

Life in freefall

In a sentence

Most of our life is spent in 'the air', but we can be confident that God's hand is always there to catch us

If you have read Ezekiel up to the point of our text for today you could not help but be struck by the almost relentlessly critical and threatening nature of his preaching.

After the opening vision of the 'appearance of the likeness of the glory of God', the text has been dark and anguished. The 'glory of the Lord' takes up a sword, first for Judah and then for the nations.

With Chapter 33 there comes a distinct shift in Ezekiel's message. Jerusalem has fallen and, though it has been briefly touched upon in the midst of his earlier, darker sermons, the possibility of forgiveness and a new relationship between God and Israel comes to the fore.

And yet, there is a sense in which this last part of the book is the true beginning of Ezekiel's preaching. Clearly this is not the case *chronologically*, beginning as he does by interpreting so darkly the approaching loss of Jerusalem. But this shift in his preaching *is* the beginning in terms of the motivation or the 'engine' of his preaching.

The wrath of God – a notion some of us find trouble even entertaining today – does not merely destroy, does not obliterate. The wrath of this God is expressed in the context of the covenant: *from the covenant to the covenant*.

The wrath of God is, then, oddly and unexpectedly *creative*. Creative intent is present in all that God does. It is God's intent in the face of the chaos of the primal waters over which God moves to bring the order of the first creation; it is God's intent in the face of the deterioration of life in Israel and the storm clouds of Babylon's approach. God is creative as much as judge as God is creative as originator and restorer.

To offer an image which might make this easier to understand, we could say that if God casts the people away – and surely God can do this – it is always, as it were, in an *upward* direction, such that the people must eventually fall again, back to God.

Such a 'flight' of the people of God is a useful metaphor for the relationship between God and the people in Ezekiel's preaching. Falling objects are unable to do anything to change their trajectory. Just think of those 'funny home videos' in which, once the hapless lad has left the mat of the trampoline in a certain direction, there is nothing he can do to stop himself sailing over the fence into the neighbours', or ending up hanging upside down from a tree. Falling is perhaps the quintessential experience of helplessness and so also the quintessential experience of chaos and nothingness.

What Ezekiel has been describing to this point has been Israel 'in the air'. And so there is, in fact, nothing to be done. Babylon is coming, the covenant has been broken, and Israel is in freefall.

As we have seen, Ezekiel takes this experience and uses it to speak of God's freedom to be for or against the people. Ezekiel interprets the chaos of history – our worst fears for ourselves and the worst we can do to each other – as a sign of our distance from God. For reasons we're heard before God is even understood to be the cause of this suffering, in a carefully qualified sense of 'cause'.

But the message of hope to which the book of Ezekiel now comes is that, if God *has* tossed the people into the air, they are not tossed to the *wind*. God braces to catch them again – to catch us. This is the gospel at the heart of Ezekiel's preaching, that the beginning and the end of all things are in God's hand and that, if we find ourselves falling, it is back into the hands of God.

To find ourselves falling is a totally disorienting experience. It is indeed an experience of utter helplessness, and we spend much of our time and energy trying not to be helpless. And so falling is what it is like to hear that we carry a terminal illness, or to lose a job, or for a marriage to fail, or for a child to die. In such moments there nothing to hold on to, nothing with which to brace ourselves, which is not also falling with us.

There is something of this in what we are experiencing at the moment. We are unable to fast-forward the clock so that the virus is behind us, unable to re-establish the patterns that make us feel safe, and exposed also to deep problems in the world and in ways of doing things we thought – not that long ago – weren't too bad. We simply have to endure the fall.

But were we to dig deeper, we might come to suspect that life as a whole – even at its best – is a kind of freefall, even if we spend most of it trying to find something to grab onto.

If that were the case – if it were that, in sickness *and* in health, whether poor *or* rich, whether young or old, we were always 'falling' – then in the end there would be not much difference between being held in God's hand and still being in the air yet destined again to land there again, and we would not worry too much about where we are.

Rather, we might simply allow that most of life is spent up in the air, and get on with the business of learning to fly.
