

Pentecost 23
8/11/2020

Mark the Evangelist

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Psalm 78:1-7

Matthew 25:1-13

The life in God's deathly approach

In a sentence

When God comes, it is to put to death death's fearful hold on us and set us free for life

In the gospel today we hear an allegory of the arrival of God and the day of judgement. The bridegroom comes to collect his bride. The bridesmaids wait for him but he is delayed and some of them miss him because they are unprepared for the wait. The lesson is clear: 'Be prepared, for you know neither the day nor the hour' of God's coming. Yet, whereas Jesus himself and certainly his early followers clearly expected an arrival of God somewhat analogous to the arrival of the bridegroom in the parable, *we* today have been waiting long enough now that we no longer expect God to arrive in this way.

We have not, however, quite dismissed the usefulness of parables like this one. For there is something else which approaches undeniably and unavoidably, and in a way quite like God's approach. This thing is our biological *death*. As with the approach of God in the parable, so with our death: it is inevitable, but we know neither the day nor the hour (except, perhaps, in some cases of suicide). We can lay down certain probabilities at certain times, of course, but the angel of death is fickle and we just don't know *when* she is going to come. Given that today God doesn't seem likely to arrive like the bridegroom, but death does, there is an almost universal tendency in popular Christian thinking to equate our deaths with the moment of God's judgement, such that in the instant that we fade from life here we appear before the throne of God for judgement. Whereas in the parable it is *God* who is moving, *we* are now the ones moving; by dying, we are brought to the day of judgement. Our parable then becomes a source of the familiar 'hit-by-a-bus' approach to evangelism: repent and believe, not because God is about to return but because you might be run over on the way home, and *then* have to face God, for it is when you die that God finally 'gets' you, when God unexpectedly but undeniably arrives in your life.

While we must reject this attempt to scare people into the fold, there is some truth in the idea that God and death come at the same moment. Yet it is not that God arrives with judgement when death comes. Rather, it is the other way around: when God arrives, death comes with him. This might seem surprising, for one thing 'religion' is supposed to be interested in is 'life after death', whether resurrection or re-incarnation. That is, 'religion' is held to equate an interest in God with the overcoming of death.

But there are two senses in which the arrival of God *brings* death.

The first sense is that, when God comes *as* God, when God comes as *creator* or, we might also say, when God reigns in our lives, we become truly the creatures we were intended to be. The simplest way of speaking of this is to say that we become truly God's creatures when we acknowledge and live with God as creator. The important

point here for our theme of death is that what distinguishes the divine creator and his creatures is *mortality*. Creatures ‘run out’ in a way that the creator does not. When God is truly God, we are truly mortal. So the coming of God is the *coming* of mortality.

Of course, we will die whether or not we acknowledge God. We have to say further, then, that when God comes God brings a *revelation* of our true mortality and a *reconciliation* to it: we are only creatures and not gods, and that’s OK.

The first sense in which we die when God comes is, then, that God’s presence makes us our true selves, which includes our mortality.

To fill this out, we have to turn to the second sense in which God’s arrival brings death. This has to do with the fact that the coming of God is not simply the arrival of an absent friend, but the arrival of the moment of *judgement*. This judgement is both a measuring and a setting right of what is found to be wrong. The judgement finds that we don’t much care simply to be creatures; mortality is painful, and we go to great lengths to keep it at bay, to deny this aspect of our true being. These lengths are the extent of our failures to love and serve. ‘Sin’ is the catch-all term for what we do to avoid death and the limitedness of being human.

These two senses in which God’s approach brings death are not limited to the moment of our biological death. We can become more creaturely and less constrained by death *before* we die, if it is the case that God has *already* approached us, and *continues* to.

And it is in the death of *Jesus* that we believe that God has come to us. Jesus’ *life* – including the way he died – was a kind of ‘death to death’ – a dying to the *power* which death exercises over most of us, in fear. Jesus’ life, then, was the living of truly human, truly creaturely life. Of course, Jesus dies the death of any creature; one way or another he was always going to die if he was truly one of us. But he lives and dies without the fear of death. He lives in such a way as to deny death’s *power* over him, a power which robs the rest of us of our true freedom and our true humanity.

What might our lives look like if we did not fear rejection, being unsafe, dying young? Jesus lived reconciled to his humanity, seeing *God* and not his impending death as the thing to be feared. The way he lived, and so the way he died, denied death its fearful hold on us. In him, then, we have seen a perfected human life. ‘Perfection’ is now not ‘doing the right thing’ – in the sense of moralist achievement. Rather, perfection is living to the very end under God’s reign – which *blesses* our mortality – and not under the shadow of death, which curses it.

Returning to our parable of the coming of the bridegroom, Jesus is now himself the wise bridesmaid who properly awaits the groom’s arrival. He is the one who knows what is required, what the wait will be like, is prepared and so endures to the joyful moment when God comes.

The meaning of the parable, then, is not merely that we must – by ourselves – wait for the coming of God. Jesus is, rather, *how* we are to wait: looking not to our own efforts and securing our own survival but receiving the achievement of Jesus as our own. Jesus himself is the reserve of oil we are to burn as we await the approach of God and, with God, the fulfilment of our true selves.

To wait by the light of Jesus is to allow our experience of death to become like his by allowing our experience of *God* to become like his. This is just what we symbolise in our baptism – that what Jesus has endured and achieved is offered in God’s grace also to us. As he died, so do we die in our baptism that, as he now lives, so might we. As

unprepared, imperfect and worthy of condemnation as we often might be, we are not left in the dark if Jesus himself is the inexhaustible fuel which burns in our lamps.

There is a moral dimension to the parable – that we *are* vigilant during the dark hours, that we are living in such a way that corresponds to the life of Jesus himself.

Fearlessness in the face of death is the source of all acts of kindness and justice, advocacy and generosity. For such things call us to make a sacrifice of ourselves which we now *can* make because, by the grace of God, we are lamps filled with the oil which is Jesus, oil which never runs out.

Let us, then, seek this oil that we might keep burning, the light of Christ, and give thanks to God for the gift of such light and life.
