

**Pentecost**  
**23/5/2021**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Romans 8:22-27**

**Psalm 104**

**John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15**

**Unbearable**

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*In a sentence*

*The Spirit of God makes heaven out of us*

Jesus says to his disciples, 'I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.'

The text is not explicit about what the unbearable things are, and the neither do the commentaries seem to be very interested in the question. Yet this might be important for a church which finds much 'unbearable': decline in numbers, deteriorating and unmanageable buildings, a much-bruised reputation and increasingly complex governance responsibilities. No small part of our own thinking about a future off this site will be 'What can we bear?' What is the relationship between these unbearable things here and now, and the things Jesus considers his disciples will not be able to bear?

The unbearable things Jesus speaks of here come a little more into view when he refers to the work of the Spirit. The work of the Spirit here is to 'convict', to 'prove the world wrong' about sin, righteousness and judgement. This is not a Spirit who sits well with much contemporary interest in 'spirituality'. This is a *spikey* Spirit that does not waft or flow or comfort but *skewers* us with the pointy end of sin, righteousness and judgement.

'I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.' They cannot bear them 'now' because the Spirit has not yet been given. The Spirit has not been given because Jesus has not yet been crucified. The unbearable thing, then, and our being able to bear it, have to do with the cross.

The death of Jesus must be a part of what will be unbearable for the disciples, yet the Spirit is no mere 'comfort' for this difficult experience, no soft cushion in a hard world. The Spirit will re-cast the cross, moving it from the world's judgement on Jesus to God's judgement on the world. The unbearability of the death of Jesus will become a new vision of righteousness.

But what then about those things we find unbearable here and now? What is the relationship between the unbearable thing Jesus would say, the way in which the Spirit makes *that* bearable, and our own unbearable things?

The Spirit makes bearable the unbearable things to which Jesus refers, most surprisingly, precisely by creating the unbearable church. The Spirit tells the truth about Jesus by *doing Jesus again*: now as the church – the unbearable church.

This is surely troubling.

When we condemn the church for its heresy or dogmatism or managerialism or incompetence or corporatism or wishy-washiness, or for its wealth or anxiety or triumphalism or self-interest or lack of faith, or whatever, we declare: surely *this* cannot bear the Word of God, be the presence of God, even be useful to God. Surely there is

more of God somewhere *else*. This is part of the appeal of modern, popular nowhere-in-particular spirituality and its aversion to being ‘locked in’ to place or community or ritual: the spiritual cannot be found *here*.

But the gift of the Spirit – the gift of *this* particular Spirit – is the gift of the extraordinary ordinary. Here, now in the church – even this church! – the truth the Spirit brings is the possibility of ‘heaven’ – God’s kingdom come, *here*. This we declare not because what of we *see* but because of *who* chooses to name this place in that way – because of whose Body we are said to become, according to the will of God.

It matters not whether the same might be said of places other than the church. It matters for us only that *this* place – our place – is claimed by God as God’s own, embraced as if an Only-Begotten Child. This is a new vision of righteousness.

This is the gospel – that, even we as are, God wills to have us. The Spirit takes what is in a community such as ours and declares that even this can bear the grace of God.

It is not for nothing that the creed has us declare, ‘We believe in the church.’ To believe in Jesus is to believe in the church. To love Jesus is to love the *crucified* Jesus, to see in the world’s abandonment and judgement of him the truth of God. In the same way, to believe in the church is to love the church as it actually is. This is not to baptise or endorse all that the church is in its externality; it is, instead, to declare, Where else would we expect the deep grace of God to be manifest except in such an unbearable place? It is here that our belief in Jesus, even our love of Jesus, becomes concrete and specific – in the particular, tangible community of which we are a part.

And out of this springs the imperative: love the church. Love the church not as an *idea* but as it *is*. *Love* your congregation; love not only the one you’re happy to sit next to, but the one who sits in front of you, or behind, or across the room. Love your church council. Love your presbytery. Love your Synod. Do this not because they are lovely, *yet*. Any of these can sometimes be quite unbearable, entirely unlovely.

Love, because it is the love which bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things which *makes* the beloved lovely. When this happens the unbearable is not made not merely bearable but a *joy*.

This matters for the process through which our congregation is presently passing – the long, drawn-out, expensive, laborious, frustrating, disappointing, dispiriting, unbearable process of trying to deal with these buildings in the context of the kind of church we are as a denomination. It also relates to the stage we are now entering – hopefully, the last few steps towards determining a future for the congregation. We can’t enter into this expecting that it will be easy, or that it will be obvious what to do, or that we will completely satisfy everyone.

But we could take our next steps in the love of which we have just spoken. We could, then, not so much *work* toward an outcome for a future for the congregation as *love* one another in that kind of direction. Then, what is ahead of us would not be something we ‘have’ to do – another unbearable thing in the life of the church. It would simply be the kind of thing we should *always* be doing – another work of love: thinking together, discussing, debating, planning, praying, and then looking to see what God can make of all that.

To believe in *this* God is to believe in the church which God’s Spirit creates – even ours, and out of ours. To believe in the church is not yet to see it, but to expect that it will come into view, and to act now in such a way that when it does appear, we will

recognise ourselves in it – no longer unbearable but cause for joy on account of God's work of grace.

Let us, then, begin and continue to live and love according to the wholly new righteousness we expect God to make out of us.

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*Re-worked from a sermon previously preached at MtE (2015)*