

Pentecost 7
11/7/2021

Mark the Evangelist

Ephesians 2:1-10
Psalm 89
Mark 6:14-29

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

In a sentence

We don't get the Good God without recognising the bad and the ugly God overcomes to love us.

In 1966 there appeared the 'spaghetti western', *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, the title of which has become a catch-phrase among us ever since. 'The Good', 'the Bad' and 'the Ugly' designated the three main protagonists, each heading towards the same stash of gold buried in a grave in an old cemetery, and each ruthless as he makes his way towards that goal; 'good', 'bad' and 'ugly' are relative terms in this view of the world!

The film itself isn't my interest this morning so much as the catch-phrase: there is a Good, a Bad and an Ugly in our reading from Ephesians this morning, at least in the way in which Paul's language seems to be received these days.

The 'Good' is the easiest to identify. This is the God who is 'rich in mercy', who 'by grace' and 'not the result of works', 'out of the great love with which he has loved us', saves those who are lost.

The 'Bad' is 'the ruler of the power of the air', and the 'spirit at work among us', which Paul considers to be oppressing human existence.

The 'Ugly' is the human being we seem to strike here. Paul speaks of the human being as 'dead through ... trespasses and sins', living 'in the passions of [the] flesh', 'those who are disobedient', 'by nature children of wrath'.

The Good, the Bad and Ugly, on this reading, correspond to Paul's account of God the benevolent grandfather, the world of oppressive powers and the human person wallowing in that oppression.

This is to misunderstand Paul, but he is commonly heard this way – as casting the world and us within it only in the negative: bad and ugly. But this negativity about human being is not quite bearable today, and so we are tempted to focus on the good over the bad and the ugly. Thus, we embrace the God of 'love' who has embraced *us* by grace. God becomes now more the God who 'loves' than the God who forgives or has mercy. This approach adores the idea of grace but has difficulty with the language of salvation and mercy, because these two concepts seem to imply that we can't quite get rid of the ugly ourselves – that we are in some ways not loveable. We claim the good, but not the ugly, and there develops an almost childish assertion that there is *only* good, and that we don't need to acknowledge the bad.

But, if not this, what are we to do with the 'ruler of the power of the air?' How do we reconcile our understanding of ourselves and our potential with Paul's apparent pessimism about human character? Can the good and the bad and the ugly be reconciled in a way which will make good sense of us, and of the world, and of God? Does Paul indeed know us better than we want to know ourselves?

We might take a lead here from the last verse of this morning's reading:

'For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life' (2.10).

There are two things to note here. First, the emphasis of this sentence (in the Greek text) falls on the 'he' (that is, 'God', not the masculinity of the pronoun): 'For we are what [he/God] has made us...' – translated differently, 'by [God] we are...' The contrast is drawn between what we make of ourselves (things of which we might 'boast', in the previous verse), and what we are if we truly spring *from God*.

And we note, second, the emphasis on being 'made' – our nature as *creat-ures*: '... [God] has *made* us, *created* in Christ Jesus...'. Here we have to drive from our heads all anxieties about modern science and the book of Genesis. Biblical talk of creation is not *cosmogony* – talk of the *origin* of the world – but *cosmology*, talk of the *nature* of the world. These two ideas are fused in modern scientific thought, but they are then typically *confused* when we try to compare scriptural talk about creation with the discoveries of science. Genesis 1 is not told to explain where the world comes from but what it *is* and – more pointedly for us – what it is *not*: the world is not God.

That might seem obvious but in practice it is extraordinarily difficult to *live*, which brings us back to the bad and the ugly. It's when worldly things take on divine significance – when we make gods of things that are not gods – that the bad and the ugly arise. When Paul talks of 'the ruler of the power of the air' (v2) and of good works we do in order to boast (v8f), he is not being unscientific or pessimistic, but giving a specifically Christian account of what happens when this particular God drops out of the picture: such things as 'the power of the air' and 'good works' are examples of ordinary worldly things taking on the dimensions of the divine, and so becoming grotesque and oppressive.

Of course, few moderns give much credence to the idea of spirits wafting about causing us to do this or that thing, but neither is that the point of Paul's language here. The 'powers' which might have us in their grip are not otherworldly but precisely *this-worldly*, yet given divine status. Consider ideas and realities past and present which hold in their grip: notions of human worth according to race, religion, gender or age; or our own personal histories – what was done to us, or not done to us, which now determines our actions and responses in ways of which we are quite unconscious; or the weight of cultural mores: who may talk to whom, knowing one's place, what is or is not honourable; or the influence of political and economic systems. And consider how often the injustice we've come to see in such realities was justified by reference to divine ordinance and will.

The Swiss theologian Gerhard Ebeling once observed that theology is necessary because the human being is by nature a fanatic. That is to say, we are prone to fanaticise about the world – to turn parts of it into the presence of God, whether that bit be an ordering which is there for our well-being – such as the economy or our social rules of engagement – or whether it be our own personal achievements. It is this fanaticism for the things of the world which gives rise to the bad and the ugly, for the bad and the ugly are simply creaturely things which been turned into divine things.

We are, Paul says, what [*God*] has made us. This is asserted as the possibility of a life free from the disorder our fanaticisms bring with them. Such a life begins with being *made*, or *remade*, and not with what *we* make of ourselves or our world. For we *are* fanatics, and we will worship things which are themselves only creaturely, and so in the end fail to be ourselves, and reduce others around us.

To cast it in the negative, our calling and so our humanity is in that we are called *not* to be God. The creature and its creator are their true selves in their proper relationship to each other. If what matters is not what we make of ourselves but what this God will make of us, then our life becomes gift and not a burden to be carried or worked out, and the world becomes open possibility and not some divinely-ordered constraint or ‘power of the air’.

Honesty would place most of us, on the terms as we’ve described them, among the ugly in the realm of the bad. For us, Paul speaks not only of creation but of the good re-creation – a starting again, life out of deathliness, a return to our humanity, an overcoming of those powers we appoint to overcome us.

Paul’s gospel matters, for surely this world needs fewer gods and more humanity. The question is whether a human being which makes *itself* is capable of getting itself right, or will in the end turn itself into yet another god. The evidence to date would suggest that the latter is the more likely.

For all the apparent ugliness and badness of his worldview, Paul sees more clearly than we do with all the marvellous things we now know. Perhaps it seems quaint or craven to suggest in this age that we need a God in order to be more human. But the irony is that, whether the suggestion is made or not, we will make the gods anyway. Paul simply points to what kind of god might actually work.

A god who sees the ugly and loves it by overcoming the bad is surely the good we need.

Let us reach, then, for such as God as this, for goodness’ sake.
