

Pentecost 14
29/8/2021

Mark the Evangelist

Ephesians 4:17-18, 25-5:2
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Without forgiveness, there is nothing

In a sentence
Forgiveness is the creative ground of all things

A passing amusement in the schoolyard when I was a kid was to sidle up to someone else – usually a friend – to give him a good punch in the arm and then step back in feigned horror to declare, ‘the Devil made me do it’. The principal purpose of the game, of course, was not to demonstrate some profound truth about the motivations of human action but the chase which ensued, in which the puncher tried to avoid what the Devil would cause the punchee to do in retribution!

Of course, modern sophisticates are beyond believing that there even exists a devil, let alone that such an entity could motivate us to act. This is the part of the joke in the schoolyard.

But this unbelief has rather far-reaching consequences. If what I do wrong cannot be attributed to a higher power, then I become solely responsible for the evil I do. This is also part of the schoolyard joke and why my friend chases me rather than rails against the devices of the Devil.

This is may not yet seem to a problem. Yet, without the Devil, not only what wrong but also what right we do comes to be centred on us *as individuals*. I and I alone am responsible for what good I do and for what evil I do.

This is assumed by the simple moral systems operating in, through and around us most of the time: we are free moral agents and what good or bad we do is our own work. And it mostly works in day-to-day life. So far, so good.

However, how do I *know* in the first place what is good and what is wrong? There are two basic options here. The first is the simplest but also the most terrifying and so the less palatable and stable: something is good because *I* do it, or bad because *I* do it. That is, I am myself the definition of goodness and badness. This is the argument of those whose actions can only be described as sociopathic – whether those actions are bad or good by other measures. It is not only the diagnosed sociopath who thinks and act this way.

The second source for goodness and badness is most generally characterised as being ‘outside’ of me. Moral measure is located in society or culture, the family or the tribe. This is our usual operating assumption when it comes to sourcing moral truth. It is on the basis of morality-as-communal that most people more or less adhere to the current lockdown directives, and are horrified that a few loud and angry voices are heard in the streets in protest against this corporate definition of the good. Yet this moral reference point is also unstable, for we also know that truth is sometimes on the lips of the contrary voice in the streets and not in the churches or halls of power. Of this, the old prophets are the proof, with Jesus himself.

The tension between individualised and communalised moral authority cuts right through us. And it is impossible to relax the tension, other than temporarily. History is driven by the struggle between the one and many, the familiar and the novel, the choice of the individual and need of the many.

We've not yet come to our focus text for today, which we do now! There is much moral direction in and around today's reading: do this, don't do that. And, for the most part, it's correct: do what Paul says and don't do what he criticises. It's not exactly rocket science.

But it is *boring*. *Morality* is boring. This is not to say that it is not *necessary*. It *is* necessary and, once more, do what Paul says, and don't do what he criticises (read it again for yourselves). *Morality* is essential but it is also dull. It's not dull in the sense that it is uneventful; history *is* the struggle over *moral* vision, over what human beings should do and become, and it often becomes a matter of life and death. *Morality* is boring in the sense that it is always there. There is always a decision to make, a balance to strike, a wager to make with respect to the next crisis – literally, the next 'judgement', ours and God's. *Morality* is boring because it is *mundane* – it's what comes with living in the world together.

Yet Paul is not boring here, if we are paying close attention. He makes his moral declarations and then, strangely, undermines them all: forgive one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you (4.32). The strangeness here is that forgiveness is not a moral action in the way that other exhortations are, to do this or not do that. Properly, forgiveness sets aside all rule-making for the sake of something other than the rules. A kind of amorality, even immorality, is implied. There *is* something to be forgiven – but forgiveness sets the mundane aside, devaluing the moral expectation which has not been met.

Struggles over morality typically – boringly – end in alienation or annihilation; bombs in Kabul airport this week are an instance of this, but so too is this or that lesser and more local moral outrage in the newsfeeds which caught our attention for a few minutes, or perhaps which happened at home. But forgiveness neither alienates nor annihilates. Instead, forgiveness creates where otherwise would have been only the nothingness of moral failure. And the appearance of something where there was nothing is never boring.

The problem with morality is not that this or that thing we might or mightn't like is encouraged or forbidden. The problem with morality is that it is usually equated with Godliness. This is why ministers preparing funerals will sometimes have to endure the declaration that, while the deceased was a committed agnostic, she was nevertheless a good Christian woman.

It's not much better in the church, of course, where we are strongly tempted to turn forgiveness into another moral action: one more good thing we do, by which we distinguish ourselves further from those who don't do the right thing.

But Godliness in the gospel is not a doing *of* good things but a *making good* of things. *Doing* good puts things in order. It is the grammar of day-to-day life together, by which we make sense to each other. *Morals* are standing orders, permission granted.

Making good, in contrast, asks no permission. It simply creates new things where there was no hope of anything. It raises the dead, breathes spirit into dust.

This creativity is what it is to forgive.

This is why forgiveness is the hardest thing we can do, but also the one thing needful.
Maybe the Devil makes us *do* stuff, maybe not. But God *makes us* – ‘for-gives’ us into being in order that we might do what God does.

We are, that others might be.

Hear St Paul, then, once more:

^{4.31} Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, ³² and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. ^{5.1} Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children...

Forgive. Create.
