

Pentecost 20
10/10/2021

Mark the Evangelist

Amos 5:6-7, 10-15
Psalm 90
Mark 10:17-31

Against dreams and visions

In a sentence

Our future is not in what we can imagine but what God has already given us

Consider the following from Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

'God hates visionary dreaming; it makes the dreamer proud and pretentious. Those who fashion a visionary ideal of community demand that it be realized by God, by others, and by themselves.

They enter the community of Christians with their demands, set up their own law, and judge the fellowship and God himself accordingly... They act as if they are the creators of the Christian community, as if their dream binds people together.

When their ideal picture is destroyed, they see the community going to smash. So they become, first accusers of the fellowship, then accusers of God, and finally the despairing accusers of themselves.'

There is *violence* in all this drive to make changes. Bonhoeffer again:

...Those who love their dream of a community more than the Christian community itself become destroyers of the community, even though their intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and faithful. (Life Together, SCM 1954, 17f)

If I see the goal, if I know what must be done to achieve it, and if I have the means to pull it off, I will work to bring the vision to reality. And I may well do this 'no matter what'. This is the logic of the suicide bomb, the engine of domestic violence, the rationale for nuclear warhead stockpiles. I will believe my vision to be *the* vision – God's vision – and that will require my all, and yours.

Yet, it is not the exercise of our power to influence which brings the kingdom of God, but God himself and, whatever God does among us, it is not violent.

To bring this home, let's recall that we as a congregation are seeking a vision for the future. Some of us dream of what we have, or have had. Some of us dream of what new thing might yet be. In either case, we are visionaries looking to the left or the right, forward or backward, up or down.

Yet, what if Bonhoeffer is right: what if God *does* hate visionary dreaming? Is this the kind of visioning we're presently encouraging? What does this mean for our planning, given that we *must* plan, that we *must* have some vision of our future?

In our gospel reading this morning, a man approaches Jesus and asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. To this well-lived life Jesus adds just one more requirement: give away all that you have, and come and follow me. This is more than the rich man can bear, and he leaves, 'grieving'.

This is one of those ‘squirmy’ readings which makes uncomfortable those of us who also have many things, but we won’t focus on that discomfort today. With Bonhoeffer in our ears, we will rather consider the rich man’s vision: the vision of ‘eternal life’. By itself, the desire for eternal life is not yet a problem. But the man links his desire to the question, ‘What must *I do*?’ In this, he assumes responsibility for achieving his most profound need, so that when Jesus ups the ante and names the thing which ‘can’t’ be done, the man’s vision and hopes are shredded. Even the disciples are horrified.

The problem here is the vision of being *rewarded* by God for the good work we have done: ‘what must I *do* to inherit eternal life?’ While we earn wages, we do not earn an *inheritance*: inheritance comes by virtue of being a son or daughter. Not what you *do*, but what you *are*, is the grounds for inheriting. With this man’s particular vision and his presumption that its fulfilment is about the choices he makes, what he needs most is lost, and he himself is also lost.

We can’t avoid asking and answering the question ‘What shall we do?’ And when we ask this, we kind of mean what is the *right* thing to do? What shall we do ‘in order to inherit eternal life’? This is the question of the rich man standing before Jesus – and it is not yet a bad question. But it turns bad when we attach to it a concern for being rewarded; with talk of reward (or punishment) we enter into the realm of anxiety and fear. To do the right thing is to win and find peace; to do the wrong thing is to lose – ourselves and the things we value – and here resides the anxiety and fear.

Yet Christian faith is not about being at peace in the knowledge that we have done the right thing. Of course, as human beings, we *must* decide: we must do *something*. But the heart of the matter is not in this.

While life might require that changes are made and that we make decisions about those changes, there is nothing we can do to change what we most basically are. The question which matters, then, is not what we will do, but *what are we*? By what spirit do we live? Where is the true source of our life? Is there any fixed thing in our lives which cannot be assailed, whatever might besiege us, whatever decisions we make?

The answer of the gospel is Yes. We are children of God, and so all that matters is *already ours* as *inheritance*. It is not ours to earn or achieve, not ours by virtue of being ‘right’ in our vision. We must indeed yet make decisions about our future, but we also hear that God has already given us adoption as his children. This is ‘eternal life’, and its concrete outworking for us is *freedom* to live as part of a community which is never destined to be a particular shape according to a specific vision. There is nothing to be done to inherit the fullness of life; it is already ours through Jesus the Son and it has less a specific shape than a particular relationship: unity around Jesus, under God. Christian discipleship – in all the things we do and say, in the visions we form and the choices we make – is simply a matter of orbiting together more closely to Jesus.

It is, then, *by the grace of God* that our dreams and visions of this or that grand community will fail and be cast aside by God, for our dreams are limited by our poor imagination. God breaks such futures on the sharp rocks of his grace so that ‘What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived’ – the things *God* has prepared for those who know themselves to be his – so that *these* things might become ours.

What happens next for us can only be good if, at its heart, it is the expectation that God will be there with us.

Let us, then, be prepared to allow that, whatever the future holds for us as a congregation – or in our individual lives – we need not fear it and so need not seek to control it, for the future belongs to the God in whose Son our lives are hidden and held safe. If we desire *that* future, we will find that else we need has been added to us.
