

Advent 1
28/11/2021

Mark the Evangelist

Jeremiah 33:14-16
Psalm 25
Luke 21:25-36

On mistaking death for God

In a sentence:

God arrives before death, that we might not die too soon

Not many people wake up in the morning knowing that today is the day they are going to die. Perhaps people condemned to execution know this, or suicides. But even then, there are stays of execution and changes of heart. Inevitable as it is, death nevertheless catches almost all of us by surprise.

Much of our lives are spent keeping death at bay, something at which we have become increasingly successful. Most of us, most of the time, can live without worrying too much “just now” about dying, even if the odds of our greeting death increase with each day we haven’t died.

Perhaps surprisingly in all of this, death is not unlike God: a limit to our being, present mostly as a horizon, arriving in its own time. No one wakes up thinking that today is the day God will finally arrive. Sometimes people gamble on this, usually under the spell of a charismatic cult leader, but disappointment here has been universal. Faith holds that God is, like death, inevitable – ultimately *unavoidable* – and also that, like death, God is unpredictable. You *will* meet your maker, like the *unexpected* thief in the night.

In today’s text and many like it, this scenario is described in terms of first century apocalyptic thought. This thinking included the conviction that God’s arrival was imminent: “Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place,” Jesus says (Luke 21.32).

We can’t believe this now, at least not in the sense we suspect Jesus and his first hearers believed it. It is entirely possible they believed this in the same way that a suicide bomber believes, or with the true-believer conviction of the staunch defender of “freedom” and “democracy”. This way of thinking was in their blood: this generation will not pass away until all this has taken place.

We can’t believe these texts in that way, not least because that generation has well and truly “passed away”. But we are clever and find a way. Noting the similarities of God and death, we collapse the inevitability of God into the inevitability of death: God arrives when death arrives. Or, as we’re more likely to put it: when we die we go to heaven (or the other place). This mostly works, although now it is not heaven coming to earth (for which we pray each week) but us going to heaven (or not). Or, more profoundly, instead of God coming with the threat of death – which is surely implied in these terrifying texts: now death brings God

Yet, death which brings God is precisely our problem. We kill or are killed, discriminate, alienate and stigmatise because it makes someone feel safer, which we imagine is what God wants for us. We deny others what they need because we feel closer to God when we hold on to our stuff. We are unfaithful or unreliable because the relationships and commitments we already have seem not to bring God with them, so we prefer others.

If God arrives when death comes, then a culture of death already enjoys the presence of God, already *is* God's kingdom – surely, the kingdom of a horrific God.

But perhaps we reject the seemingly obsolete “this generation” of our text too quickly. Maybe the point here is that God is “more” inevitable than your death – if one thing cannot properly be more inevitable than another. It's not death you have to worry about, but God. At least, this is what we ought to *want* – the coming of God and not death; it is, again, the meaning of “thy kingdom come”.

We pray “your kingdom come” because we are already in the presence of death. Our deathly ways do not bring God, at least, not *this* God. With this God, death is real but is not a means to good things. Death is not a *method* for God.

The world is such that death always comes too soon. This is not that we stop breathing prematurely but that death presses in on us in the form of fear, worry, hatred, law, oppression, possessions; or death presses in when we employ it to cause these things in others.

We sometimes speak of “realised eschatology” – the notion that the promised gifts of God begin to be available before the end of all things. But there is also a “realised thanatology” – a realised social, personal, political “death” – which arrives before our biological death. Faith seeks *God's* early arrival because *death* has come among us too soon.

We read these strange and seemingly out-of-date texts today because they pose a question: Does the arrival of God coincide with the end of life, or its beginning? And then, *when* does God arrive? What we think the answers to be here can be seen in how we live. We do well to ask ourselves, Is the world more alive now because of the way I have lived today?

If God's coming is the beginning of life then, in a deathly world like ours, God's arrival marks the beginning of death's of own death. Something new is in our midst.

Rejoice, Jesus says, not because you have dealt enough death to usher in your own little interpretation of God's kingdom but because the world is less deathly now that something of God's kingdom of life has begun to take shape in your lives.

And suffer, Jesus says, not because death oppressed you but because you refuse to let it deny the life which God's kingdom promises.

The apocalyptic mind declares that God comes before death, and that this is good news for all who say *No* to struggling under death before its time.

It is in an outlook like this, and life-affirming actions which resonate with it, that our redemption draws near. Stand up, Jesus says, and raise your heads: God is coming, your redemption is drawing near.

So, *live* and *bring* life.
