

Epiphany 5
6/2/2022

Mark the Evangelist

Genesis 2:18-25
Psalm 138
Luke 2:22-40

On being a true lie

In a sentence:

The church is more – and less – important than it can imagine.

Storytellers tell lies.

A storyteller requires her audience to accept some basic premise that is not true, in order that the story might begin to unfold. The premise might be simply the proposal that the story begins where the teller begins, for every story begins somewhere before its beginning. More fancifully, the premise might be that there is, in our midst, a hidden world of wizards and witches, within which is unfolding a drama that threatens the whole world, and everything hinges on the personal character of an 11-year-old boy. If it is not a world of witches and wizards, the premise might be that time travel to the past is possible, or an unbelievably grotesque murder, or that a little drummer boy happened to be passing by just as a baby was being laid in a manger. Once we allow the premise, the story has traction and takes us where the storyteller wants.

Stories, then, are lies. And the storyteller needs our complicity in the lie if the story is to gain lift. We become willing conspirators with the storyteller in this way because, however untruthful the story's premise is, the story is ultimately not about the lie but about people like us in that kind of context. Stories can brutalise reality because they are not about space travel or magic or prehistoric times but about how the various actors placed on those stages interact in those contexts. The basic premise is a lie, but the action might not be. The truth in the story is the human drama in that imagined context.

Stories, then, are *true* lies – creations out of nothing. “Once upon a time, there was...” – this always means “There I was *never, ever...*” a princess, a frog, a drummer boy or even a manger. Or, at the very least, it would not matter if there were not. And yet *does* matter what happened after the never-happened.

It is the same in church. We gather here week after week to tell a story, and that story is also a lie told to hear the truth. We've heard today from Genesis 2. Genesis 1 relates the creation in 6 days. Genesis 2 seems to forget where Genesis 1 ended and places Adam alone in the Garden without animals or Eve, which are added as the chapter unfolds. After the creation of Eve – which ends this second creation narrative – the story continues in Chapter 3 with the apple affair and the expulsion from the Garden, to which we'll come next week.

The creation of Adam and Eve is a foundation story that places human beings in creation but also casts them as distinct from the rest of creation. In addition to this shared distinction, the man and the woman are, just as importantly, there *for each other*.

What the story might mean for human beings in sexual differentiation won't be our interest today. Neither will the social and sexual dynamics that some have read into Eve's arrival after Adam as “helper and companion”. Rather, we will first note that this story – in common with all stories – is a true lie. This is what we mean when we call it a *myth*: not that it is untrue – a very narrow meaning of myth – but that it is a lie told to

speak the truth. The truth is that “it is not good to be alone” and God does something about this, which is to say that if there were to be an Adam, there would have to be an Eve.

But we’re going to go another step today and tell a bigger lie, even less believable than the Genesis narrative itself: for a proper understanding of this story, we must see that Adam is the world and Eve is ... the church. “It is not good for the world to be alone”, God says. And so Adam is lulled into a deep sleep, and the church is called out of him and presented back to him as “a helper and companion”. And Adam declares with delight, “Here at last is my truth”, and the world leaves what was its own and joins itself to the church. And the creation is now complete.

Now, Genesis 2 is clearly not about this. Of course, it’s not clear what Genesis 2 actually *is* about. This is not least because the story is three or four thousand years old, and the opinion about its meaning is divided into about one opinion for each of those years. There’s a sense, then, that each time we tell it, we lie above and beyond the original storyteller’s lie – and perhaps we lie all the more, the more seriously we tell it.

Our deceit this morning is not so much the untruth of myth but of typology. Typology is what allows the gospel writer Matthew to say that Jesus is the true Israel, what allows St Paul to say that Jesus is the true Adam, what allows Rowling to say that Voldemort and his Death Eaters are really Hitler and the SS, and what allowed us to say what we did last week: that the Congregation of Mark the Evangelist is the deep and the void God acted upon in Genesis 1. In typological thinking, we take a couple of things which look to be *little bit* the same and ask, what would we see if they *were* the same? (In fact, Paul does something a little like what we’re proposing today when he considers human marriage to reflect the marriage of Christ and the church [Ephesians 5.22-32]).

Eve-with-Adam looks a bit like church-with-world. Whatever else we might read into it – and there are some pretty unpalatable readings possible – the Genesis story ties Adam and Eve closely together. This matters if Eve is the church and Adam the world. If Adam and Eve are somehow “for” each other then Eve-as-the-church is *for* Adam-as-the-world.

In the creation of Eve, we see at least the establishment of human relationships and the possibility of a continuing history. But there is more than this. As we have already noted, creation is completed in Eve. God, then, is finally revealed as the creator in Eve’s appearance: God “becomes” the God we know when Eve arrives. Eve’s arrival, then, becomes a sacrament of the being of God as creator, and so of Adam’s own being as creature. In Eve, Adam receives himself – no longer being alone – and so receives God. There is no Adam, and so no God-as-creator, without Eve.

Such a reading of the Genesis story is risky. But it’s essential to see that it’s risky because we’re telling a lie, and really good liars eventually have trouble distinguishing between the lie and the truth. This is why reading the Bible is so dangerous.

Our particular true lie today is that the church is to the world as Eve is to Adam. We know, of course, that we – as the church – have a mission. But the Eve-Adam dynamic has a surprise in it, which might open up our thinking about how God works with the church. Our experience of mission is that it is hard work and that we’re not very good at it. In the creation story, however, something strange to our expectations takes place: Adam recognises himself in Eve: flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone. More than this – surprising in what we assume to have been a patriarchal culture – Adam leaves *his* family and goes to Eve. Nothing could be easier, so far as Eve – the church – is concerned.

If our borrowing of Eve and Adam for thinking about the church in relation to the world has any truth, it might cause us to wonder: what would it mean for the world to recognise itself in the gift of the church? What “attracts” Adam-world to Eve-church? And what would this mean for the church’s own understanding of itself and its vocation?

As a bare story of the creation of bare human beings we might guess at part of what Adam found attractive in Eve: they were naked and not ashamed! But even the original hints at much more than sex. Adam becomes a *believer* when he sees Eve, for there is truth in her appearing. In Eve, at last, it all comes together.

And there is truth in the appearing of the church. Here we can begin to build on what we considered last week: the utter freedom the church has, if it is the church of the free God. But the essential thing is that this cannot be sheer freedom *from* all things, if the church is Eve-like. The freedom of the church will be a *bound* freedom, a freedom to be itself in relation to the Adam-like world. The radical freedom of the church is a freedom not from but *for* the world.

This is to say that the freedom of the church is to be oriented towards those as different from itself as Eve is from Adam. Adam is bereft because everything in the world apart from Eve is less than he needs. Adam – and so the world, and so God – are not complete without the sending of Eve.

Can we grant this lie, in order to become the truth of this story? Can the church *really* be all this? Can *Mark the Evangelist* be this as we take our next step? Would it be truly a lie to hold this, or would it be to lie truly?

It is only if the latter is that case that it is worth our while even bothering with taking the next step.

It is only in the space between the lie and the truth that God – and we – happen.

Let us, then, become a true lie. Let us strive to be a story about God and the world which could scarcely be true, but *must* be if God is anything like the story says, and we are to have any hope.
