

Easter 7  
29/5/2022

Mark the Evangelist

Revelation 2:8-11a  
Psalm 71  
Matthew 11:25-30

On being relevant

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*In a sentence:*

*Christian discipleship is purposed with being “relevant” – relieving – of the burdens which deny peace and justice*

It’s something of an occupational hazard that, from time to time, someone feels that a Christian minister should know, “I’m not religious; I think that when you die, that’s the end, and there’s nothing more.” In this way, religion is reduced to an interest in life after death.

This is an understandable reduction, given how the church has often linked upright living with the reward of eternal life. If we quite can’t conceive of the possibility of what is dead being meaningfully alive again at some time in the future, then the rejection of eternal life leads predictably to the rejection of religion. This doesn’t mean rejecting the moral life but does see religion with its trappings to be an over-dressed moralism. It seems clear that we can be “good” without religion, so why bother? This is a sensible line of thought, so far as it goes (although, on close examination, it doesn’t “go” as far as many seem to think). In this way, religion seems to be shown to be quite “irrelevant” to modern, intentionally this-worldly existence.

The question of “relevance” has become a touchstone for thinking about what makes for good modern religion among those still at least loosely interested in religious things. We assess our doctrines and liturgies, among other things, in terms of their perceived relevance. Yet we’re not often clear what we mean by “relevant”. Generally, it has to do with vague ideas about whether some belief or practice “makes a difference” – a positive difference. However, things become more precise when we look into the source of the word. Something is literally (etymologically) relevant when it *relieves*. Relevance is relieving. To say of something – including religion – that it is not relevant is to say that it brings no relief, that it does not “lighten” what burdens we think we carry (to “re-lieve” is to “make light again”, to bring levity, lightness). A thought, a practice, a conviction is properly relevant when it fills a need, answers a question, relieves a burden.

To reject life after death, then, is to say that it brings no relief from whatever we think weighs us down. And by this, we mean that it brings no relief, *here and now*, except perhaps as a kind of *distraction* from where we are, a turning away from the reality and meaning of the present. Indeed, the promise of life after death can make things *worse* before death, if that promise is used to *justify* pain and difficulty here and so to justify a refusal to do anything to alleviate that suffering. This reading of promised life after death in nineteenth-century Christian society led to Karl Marx’s famous critique of religion:

*“Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.”*

Religion, that is, works to stupefy the people in the present with promises of being part of a bigger picture in a future which, for most, coincides with their death. In this way, life after death can be weaponised to suppress the possibility of any good in the suffering *present*. What we have heard from John this morning *could* certainly be read this way: “Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life” (2.10).

With the mention of Marx here, we see the importance of clarity about how life after death might be relevant – how it might relieve us here and now. It won’t do to reduce heaven to personal pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die for those who had little pie during their lives. Having rejected how talk about eternal life was related to life here and now in the Christian society of his time, Marx developed a powerful alternative understanding of where we are now, where heaven is, and the path between the two.

The power of Marx’s alternative is still active in our very midst today. If we want to explain why Russia is in Ukraine, we could point to Marx; if we want to explain why China is in the Solomon Islands or why North Korea keeps plopping missiles into the Sea of Japan, we could point to Marx. It doesn’t matter whether he would be happy with these developments. The point is that these are the real-world consequences of getting wrong the relationship between life now and any life which might yet come. The dominant reading of heaven’s relationship to the world in Marx’s time didn’t work, and his response to that injustice writes the front pages of our newspapers today.

The fact that, in the end, Marx rejected altogether an interest in life after death – and that we are still in the midst of death – indicates that we aren’t guaranteed peace simply by rejecting life after death. The relationship between today and tomorrow – between the life we have now and the life to come – is no mere “religious” issue. What follows today is at the heart of our life together – whether we imagine ourselves religious or secular. Every politics, whether it imagines itself as religious or secular, has a vision of life at the end

None of this is “relevant” yet, in the sense of being itself “relieving”! The point of teasing out how these ideas have worked for us is to show that, wild though its method is, the book of Revelation’s interest in the life to come is much closer to our own social and political concerns than might first seem to be the case.

Revelation was written to people who were suffering, doubtless often much more profoundly than many of us are at the moment. We might look more closely at Revelation’s martyrs in a week or two, but it is important that what is said to those sufferers is not what Marx heard and saw. Opium is for those we are not able or interested in helping but whom we want to keep *quiet*, resting in peace. Religion, with its promise of a coming relieving heaven, is here a justification of the wrongful present: it’s *OK* that you suffer, because there’s a heaven to come.

The book of Revelation, however, speaks a word to suffering people which doesn’t dismiss their suffering but names it as *right* suffering. It was profoundly wrong *that* they suffered, and they were right to experience it as such. When John writes, “Be faithful unto death”, he marks his readers’ tribulation as true suffering and deeply unjust. There is no *justification* of pain and loss in Revelation; those who suffer are to be avenged for the injustice of what has happened (another troubling aspect of Revelation for modern sensibilities!). The One who promises this future in Revelation has no interest in the status quo which makes life so hard. It is an offence to God that God’s people suffer, as much as it is an offence to those who suffer. This is to say that Christian visions of heaven aren’t given to distract us from hell on earth but are to *mark* it *as* hell – as *wrong*. The declaration of suffering as wrong from the point of view of heaven’s future is a *judgement* on the present and, as such, *calls for a response*. This means that the

difference between any hell now and any heaven to come is not merely black against white but is heaven's *pull* against hell. Talk of heaven becomes now not simply the expounding of a comforting beatific vision. Talk of heaven is the beginning of a struggle. Talk of heaven is *resistance*.

Yet this is not the resistance of the revolutionary. While the Marxists knew that a mere promise of heaven was not answer enough to death, they saw death as its own solution. The communist revolutions which flowed from Marx' reading of history saw death not only as what we suffer but as the *means* – the method – for ending that suffering. This dynamic, too, contributes to the front pages of our newspapers: the imagination that the death we are experiencing can be alleviated (note: re-lief and al-leve...) by more death. This is doubtless part of what causes a young man to take automatic weapons into a schoolyard, for whatever "relief" it seemed such violence might bring at least to him (Uvalde, May 24 2022).

Against this, and despite the violence of the book of Revelation itself, talk of heaven is an act of peace in the midst of war. We say this because Jesus was an act of peace in the midst of unpeace. Acts of peace in the midst of war are not about life after death but life *before* death: life in the face of death.

This is relief which names injustice and unpeace, by demonstrating something entirely different. It is not an easy way, but it is the way of Jesus and his disciples: enduring unto death, so that death itself will not endure. Life in the face of death – what could be more "relevant" than that?

"Come to me", Jesus says, "all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am relevant, and you will find rest for your souls. (Matthew 11.28-30 *alt!*).

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