

Pentecost 8
31/7/2022

Mark the Evangelist

Colossians 3:1-10
Psalm 85
Luke 12:13-21

Heaven's work

In a sentence:

Heaven is not a place of mere rest but a life in which work and rest are properly related to each other; heaven, then, is a possibility here and now.

Why is it that a great number of us, a great deal of the time, are “ready for a holiday” – ready to leave work, whatever “work” might be for us?

It probably has something to do with the *way* we work. There's the distance we might have to travel to work – maybe even moving house, interstate, or even internationally. There are the hours we might have to work. There are the *people* we have to deal with – whether our colleagues or our employers. Perhaps there's the sheer difficulty of what we do, or the state of boredom it lulls us into. To acknowledge all this is to say that work can *hurt*, and so we much prefer to be away from it – relaxing, eating, drinking and being merry, perhaps.

I suspect that most of us have a picture in our heads of heaven being not only a place where birds are twittering incessantly and all our friends and family (or at least the ones we like) are around us, but also being a place where we're on constant holiday! – kind of a heavenly “idle rich” way of being! This seems to have been the plan of our barn-building friend in Jesus' parable today – we'll call him Barney. In the story, God calls Barney a *fool*. Perhaps it's part of his foolishness that he thought he'd finally found heaven on earth: the ability to withdraw from the world of work. Heaven is no longer having to work.

Those who know their Old Testament will remember that at the end of the story of Adam, Eve and the apple, God lays curses on the labours of Adam and Eve. The woman's labour – understood here as giving birth – will become a matter of great pain, and the man's labour – tilling the soil – would become an ongoing battle with the earth to produce what they needed. The important point is not whether we buy into this particular explanation of why labour is so difficult, or whether we have different types of work today. The important thing is that the *work* itself is not the punishment. In the Paradise of Eden, Adam and Eve *already had work to do* – working the soil and raising families – and this was so even before the apple-munching episode. Work is part of the *perfect* human condition, if such a condition is what life in Eden is supposed to represent. God creates Adam and puts him in the Garden to till it and keep it.

Work, then, is a part of true created human being. If that seems depressing to you, it gets worse if we imagine “getting to” heaven to be like a return to the Paradise of Eden: there'll be work to do in heaven, too! That is perhaps not the most comforting thing the tired and weary have heard from a pulpit! We usually talk about *having* to work as if it were a burden rather than because it is part of what God has given us. Our man Barney didn't “have to” work anymore. He used his possessions to protect himself from the need to work, and perhaps that was part of his problem. Perhaps Barney's foolishness was not merely that he set himself up for a secure future without thought for others

around him, but that he thereby also cut himself off from what he was created for – work. And perhaps most of us are still thinking that we’re with him!

My point here is not that work should be easy, but only that it is, in itself, *good*. Barney and most of the rest of us get work out of perspective. We get work out of perspective in that we work hard for *futures* we might not actually have. The terrifying word in Barney’s ears is that “*Tonight your very life will be required of you*”; essentially, he hears that, for all of his *work*, he will not enter into any *rest*. Barney doesn’t get his day off, and it scarcely helps to say that now he “rests in peace”!

What good is retirement if you drop dead the day after you stop work, or the year after? More to the point, what good was your *life* if your work-life was only oriented towards the “rest-life” in retirement, but all you finally do is leave a barn-sized super-payout to your estate? Our Barney has not been short-changed in death but in life. We can’t rest properly if we don’t work properly. If we work for the wrong reasons – towards the wrong end – we will rest for the wrong reasons, in the wrong way. Rest becomes escape from work, and work becomes the possibility of rest. In this way, we divide ourselves into being just one part of the whole God has made us to be; we might recall here the division we saw between work and rest in Martha and Mary a couple of weeks ago.

Perhaps Barney said to himself, “I’ve earned my retirement,” with a strong emphasis on the “*earned*”. The problem here is that God *gives* us rest – as symbolized by the Sabbath – for *nothing*, quite unearned. God actually *commands*, *Observe the Sabbath*: stop working once in a while, for Christ’s sake (literally, *for Christ’s sake*! God asks us to do everything for the sake of Christ!). If we go to work with the idea of *earning* our break or retirement, who do we imagine is the task-master we will owe, and who will owe us our rest at holiday time, or when we turn 55 or 60 or 65? It is not the God who commands that we rest. Who, then, have we been serving, if we’ve been lucky enough to have work to do?

We share Barney’s desire to relax, eat, drink and be merry! But such things are properly a *part* of life and not a *stage* in life. If they were only a stage of life, and even the *best* stage, then the rest of life is just a warm up to what we might not actually get to.

“*Tonight your very life will be required of you*” are words we’ll all hear one day, so to speak. Perhaps the difference for a Christian ought to be that such words don’t catch us by surprise or disappoint us because we haven’t actually started living yet.

By God’s grace, may we *not* be caught by surprise but be found to have lived a life of work and rest, labour and love, and be found to have been satisfied with that.
