

Pentecost 7
7/7/2024

Mark the Evangelist

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

Psalm 48

Mark 6:1-13

The Thorn Which Pierces the Veil

Sermon preached by. Matt Julius

*God, may my words be loving and true; and may those who listen discern what is not.
Amen.*

As I begin this sermon two things give me some encouragement:

Following the Gospel reading, I am very glad to be preaching in Melbourne. I was born in Ōtautahi Christchurch. This is not my hometown, so there is some hope!

Second, my focus today will be on our reading from 2 Corinthians. As I prepared for this sermon I went back over some of my notes from the class I took on this epistle. I found a quote I wrote in a reflective piece we were asked to write about our major exegetical essay:

“The sense of the Bible’s distance can be surmised from the immense struggle I had with the major exegetical essay - submitting work I was unhappy with. My sustained engagement with the text revealed it to be far more complex and foreign than I had hitherto appreciated. It stood against me...”

I have been in the depths with this text before. So at the very least the thorniness of today's reading isn't new!

The challenge in engaging scripture is that the text always pulls us in two opposite directions.

On the one hand, the closer we look at the text, the more we wrestle with its language, the historical context, the sweep of its ancient rhetoric, the subtle references to other texts within and beyond scripture, the more and more we appreciate its complexity. So far as I can tell all of scripture was written by aliens. People whose lives and understandings of the world are so remote from me that I can scarcely imagine what their world was like. The texts which we have received are utterly distant and strange.

On the other hand, because what we have received in these texts is, “prophetic and apostolic testimony, in which [we] hear the Word of God and by which [our] faith and obedience are nourished and regulated.” (*Basis*, 5) Because these texts are a witness to our living faith in a living God, they are the most intimate of texts. Not alien, but deeply, deeply personal. Not distant, but close.

This is the mystery of what it means to encounter the Word of God in the scriptures. To interweave the intimacies of our relationship with God with the stories of alien, yet fellow, believers long ago. There is a sense in which the way we understand the world itself needs to be pierced through by the light of our experience of faith.

Part of what makes the Apostle Paul quite difficult to read is that he is often reconfiguring our understanding of the world itself. In part this is because of his own transformative encounter with the Risen Christ. In light of this encounter Paul was forced to reevaluate everything he knew about himself and the world. Such a radical transformation led him to reinterpret his personal, as well as cultural and religious,

identity and history. In this way many of us can identify with Paul: knowing for ourselves the indelible mark our encounter with Christ has left on who we are and how we make sense of ourselves and the world.

And yet, the more alien dimension of Paul's reconfiguration of history arises out of his place within the particular historical, cultural, and religious moment in which he lived. While Paul, in today's reading, offers a parody of mystical experiences of the heavens, Paul very much lived in a world in which journeys through the heavens were a live option. Part of what makes the parody work is the assumption of a multilayered heaven - with estimates ranging from 3 to over 300 layers ... And the place of paradise among these heavens.

Our challenge as those listening for the Word of God in the Scriptures is to understand just how Paul's reconfiguration of the world helps us to do the same.

Paul adopts the posture of a mystic trying to argue for the validity of his ministry. Arguing that he has seen through the veil of the world, and ascended to the third heaven. We might never really know which schema of heaven Paul had in his head: 3 layers of heaven? 7? 10? Much of this text is still too alien to really know so.

But it is fairly clear that Paul is using a fair bit of irony here. This mystical experience has not, in the end, filled Paul with mystical insight: he declares only that he is a fool. Whatever he learnt was unutterable anyway. So too, this experience has not made Paul the strong decisive leader who peers through the veil to the truth of the matter. Paul is weak, and has a thorn in his flesh.

We might imagine that when Paul says this mystical journey ended up in Paradise that he arrived late to an empty Eden. Elsewhere Paul uses the interplay of Adam and Jesus to talk about the way the world has become captive to sin. Perhaps in this story Paul arrives to find Paradise already lost. Paul is whisked up to see the mysteries of all of time and space, and returns with nothing.

In the end the best Paul could hope for is a t-shirt that reads: "I got whisked up to heaven and all I got was this lousy thorn in my flesh."

The whole point of Paul's story about traversing the heavens seems to be how irrelevant that whole journey is. How little it matters supposedly understanding all the mysteries of the world.

What ultimately matters is the piercing of the thorn in his flesh. Again, we'll never really know what this thorn was. But we might make something of the fact that thorns pierce the flesh. At least rhetorically for Paul, the thorn draws him back to the experience of Christ. Pierced flesh, suffering in the flesh, weakness which holds a hidden power.

Ultimately the great mysteries of the world are not to be found or solved by some insight into the riddle beneath all things. Rather, it is always back to the cross which we must return. The power of *that* weakness, the strength in *that* pierced flesh.

So what, then, as we move from this quite alien story to our own lives of faith?

Perhaps we can be so bold as to imagine our own journey through the heavens.

"I once knew a Church which was so enamoured by its own moral clarity ... that was able to see that protecting its place and influence in the world was like recreating Paradise ... that had left a large legacy in society ..."

But all of this, in the end, counts for very little. What the Church needs is a thorn in its flesh. A piercing which reminds us of the crucifixion, which is the true axis of history. A thorn which — and we should be a little bit bold here — helps us to hold lightly the

idea that, “the moral arc of the universe is long, but bends towards justice.” Not because God is not sovereign over the world, but because no one uses this quote as a word of repentance. We must allow the thorn of the cross to pierce the flesh of the Church, and remind us that we do not see through the veil of the world when we are convinced of the Church's self-importance. We see through the veil when we are reminded that it is the cross which pierces the veil.

The cross which transforms our lives, and leads us to the kinds of service which are for their own sake — not merely to secure the success of our various political projects. It is the cross of a living God: the Risen Crucified One, who ultimately transforms the stories of our lives. So that We do not seem to protect or sustain the institutions of the Church, but the resurrection life in the crucified bodies of the world.

This is the secret behind the veil. Not a glimpse into paradise. But the vision of the cross in *this* world, with all its chaos and confusion. This is the world which needs the piercing, saving power of God. No other world and no other salvation. Not an institution sustained for its own sake, but a people formed by the transforming power of God. People who know hope, and live love, and seek fresh mercy every day.
