

ECHOES OF GOD: JOURNEYING WITH THE WORD OF GOD



Week Seven: Paul and the Letters

The New Testament Letters, mainly of Paul, show how the renewal of heart has happily started and how salvation happens, in different places, with different people being freed from the particular realities that bind them. They speak of how the power of “*the God’s*” Spirit has been poured out on the world from the first Pentecost onwards, and is active still. These Scriptures help us to discern whether what is happening now is in the same Spirit. They reveal what lives lived in the form of Jesus Christ look like.

Main Text: 1 Corinthians 13: 1-13 - Hymn to Love

This text echoes the underlying motivation and practice of Jesus’ whole ministry, and of God’s creative will throughout the history of God’s People.

13 If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

⁴ Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷ It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

⁸ Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. ⁹ For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; ¹⁰ but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. ¹¹ When I was a

child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. ¹² For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. ¹³ And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

(New Revised Standard Version.)

Paul's theology is essentially a theology of the cross (I Corinthians 1 and 2). But again, on the cross it is the mysterious God "*I will be where I will be*" acting to bring the human-divine estrangement to an end by entering the most "god-forsaken" place out of love. The cross reveals God wanting reconciliation yet at the same time it is the paradoxical justice of God cf. Romans 8: 31-32 "*If God is for us who is against us?*" In Jesus' death, God redefines what it is to be human. Great theologians such as Hans Urs von Balthasar and Karl Barth explore how the cross judges and rejects all our limited self-understanding. The cross says that the foolishness of "*the God*" is wiser than the wisdom of men and women. Therefore, lowliness and even death are no longer obstacles to self-fulfilment. To be truly human demands we first accept our humanity (cf. Philippians 2: 5-11). If we are willing to be creatures and allow God to be Creator then all sorts of consequences become possible (cf. Romans 4:7 and Philippians 2:9). Then the cross becomes God's call to accept Jesus' definition of ourselves as in Mark 8:35 "*For those who want to save their life will lose it. And those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the Gospel will save it.*"

Mark reflects Paul's teaching when he defines the Messiah in terms of the cross, (Mark 8: 27-33). His theology of the cross echoes Paul's writing which also echoes, and is in continuity with, Jesus' life and death. And Jesus reveals the unconditional mercy of God echoing this major theme of the Hebrew Scriptures. As a result, the word "*God*" has to be given a new meaning. This is very clear in Mark 4:26-29 where the Kingdom or Rule of God comes independently of human ethical and religious attempts at self-salvation. Jesus frees us from the need to achieve religious security through pious or worthy acts.

In Paul and Mark's teaching Jesus reveals the true God whom no one knew. This is the God capable of what we are not – capable of allowing rejection, of being insignificant, of not asserting self, nor of crushing opposition. On the cross, God takes the brokenness of the world into God's self. This is the fulfilment of the original divine self-revelation in Exodus 3:14. God in sovereign freedom is here on God's terms, and not ours.

Paul sums this up in his letter to the Christian community in Rome:

"What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes who was raised, who is at the right hand of God. Will hardship or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers... nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8: 31-39)

From the time of the cross onwards, anything we think of as manifesting the absence of God is capable of manifesting God's presence. The cross is a judgement against the tendency of religion to domesticate God, and it remains a permanent critique of the inhumanity of much religious practice.

Paul came to understand all of this in his encounter with the Risen Christ on the Road to Damascus. Paul was travelling with the authority of the Jerusalem leaders to crack down on the disciples of Jesus as culpable heretics who were perverting the true teaching of the revelation of God. He had permission to use the ultimate violence of the death penalty. The risen Lord who encounters him cries out "*Saul, Saul why are you persecuting me?*"

Paul realises that it is precisely the same God of Israel working through Jesus, who is now present through his risen “body”, the Spirit inspired community.

Like the cross, Jesus’ resurrection cracks open further, their inadequate image of God – revealing how all communities are locked into systems of violence, even God’s people Israel. The resurrection demands that we go beyond exclusion and the violence that diminishes life in others. The resurrection invites us to discover models of living in which men and women, freed from the fear of death, can create an order based on graciousness and reconciled life, rather than violence and enforcement.

The remedy is remembering the Gospel and hearing the echoes of the faithful-loving-kindness of our mysterious God. And so our minds and hearts will be broken open and changed. Only then will come the challenge to live accordingly, and only then can we do so happily!

Reflection

The Acts of the Apostles seems to end rather suddenly. It tells of Paul in Rome.”

³⁰ He lived there two whole years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him, ³¹ proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.”

But of course it hasn’t ended. There are Apostles still living out the Jesus-shaped life of reconciliation in our world. Imagine you are continuing to write the Acts of the Apostles. What would you point to as the sign of the Spirit of Christ still at work in the lives of individuals or communities in our world?

If you need some help read Corinthians 13: 1-13 again and from verse 4 where the word “love” appears read Jesus, and then read it again replacing love with your own name. It has echoes of “the faithful-loving-kindness” of “the God” of the Covenant now made flesh in the community of Christ, his body, which is now us.



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