

August 3, 2008

"...let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven"

Do we not have here, finally, something which the preacher cannot argue is the opposite of what it seems to say!? "Let your light shine"; "do good works" that may be seen, and this that people might give glory to God. These are the verses which been the unspoken motivation of countless of neighbourly acts by good Christians, and been the secret reason behind thousands of church social justice programs: "do good, that people might come to know of the goodness of God".

And yet, how often to we find that our good works issue in the giving of glory to the Father in heaven? Is it not that case that our good works, almost without exception, bring forth praise not for God, but for ourselves, even if this is the opposite of our intention? And while we might try to object, "Not I, but Christ within me", is this ever understood? While we might expect this to be the case in circles without any express interest in the things of heaven, it is very much the case also in the church. We are very good at congratulating those who have done good things for what has been done. But the further step – the giving of glory to God – is one which is rarely taken.

The problem here is not that the things we congratulate other people for are not really "good" works; It is rather simply that such good deeds, if they don't draw attention away from ourselves to God, are not the works Jesus speaks of here. The good things we are praised for doing are things which can reasonably be expected of us as competent members of society. The kindly act, the gentle word, the generous donation, the sacrifice of time – these *are* important, but "God" is actually largely irrelevant here; for there is no shortage of good-hearted, kindly folk who manage to do good things without God's prompting and who would froth at the mouth at the suggestion that God be praised on account of the good things *they* have done. And such an objection would be fair enough. We don't do God or ourselves any favours for making God responsible for all the things we see as good in each other.

Now, there is an appropriate giving of glory to God noted in the Scriptures, but it is something which takes place for what *God* does, not for what his people do. In fact, it is rather more likely that God will be blasphemed on account of the actions of his people that that he will be praised (Romans 2). If it is possible, as Jesus suggests, that glory might be given to God what *we* do, then this will be for things we do which are, in a sense, *themselves the work of God*. And this brings us to a question as to what God's good work *is*.

When it comes to speaking about doing good works, we don't often reflect upon the work which *God* does. We are much more likely to think about the things which God *requires* of us. God requires of us "the good" – to

be "righteous", upright, and so forth. This can range from the relatively banal – such as being honest in our tax returns – to the very religious, such as being regular in our attendance of worship or making efforts to tell others of God's love in Christ. (And there is nothing wrong with such things as these, as far as they go). But we do not praise God for what he *requires* of us – which can often enough seem to be a great burden (and who wants to praise a tyrant who heaps upon us unreasonable demands?). Rather, God is praised for what *God* does; and scripturally, what God does is bring peace through mercy and forgiveness for a stubborn and rebellious people. The praise of God has to do with grace, forgiveness and reconciliation.

But this language is too familiar to Christians, too "nice". We must note that talk of grace and forgiveness brings us again to the realm of the strange righteousness of God, as we've encountered it over the last few weeks. In fact, the praise of our "Father in heaven", issues from God's making good of the cruciform, or cross-shaped, life. The cruciform life is one which takes seriously the vexed nature of our existence, including the impossibility of doing the right. It first takes shape in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, who stands at the point where the competing demands of God and his people meet and exact their toll. That toll is death when neither of the claimants backs down. The good work which brings a glorifying of our Father in heaven involves, then, in the first instance, a death. This death is an unwilling one in the sense that it is not the intention of our good actions, but is nevertheless their outcome. Our rules do not keep us safe from each other, or even from ourselves, someone always misses out, always feels that their freedom has been curtailed.

By way of illustration, I was struck this week by a radio interview with our Prime Minister. The focus was the apparent, or declared, crisis of falling house prices in a large sector of the market. In the background of the discussion was the stated but scarcely taken into account fact that a few months ago the crisis was one of the increasing *unaffordability* of housing and the corresponding sky-rocketing of rents across the country. Now, presumably, the solution to housing being too expensive is that it be made cheaper, or that people needing it have more money at their disposal when it comes to buying a house. Yet part of the cause of the high cost of housing was the just that attempt to give more people the money to buy houses through first-home-buyer grants and such things. Anyway, the most interesting point in the interview for our purposes today was when, with all the freedom from responsibility which journalists presume, the interviewer asked the PM something to the effect, "So you think it a good thing that house prices are falling?" Just here the trap opens up, as the PM was effectively invited to take sides, and to declare that he thought it good that people might now find themselves with mortgages higher than the current market value of their homes, for now other people might be more able to enter the housing market. And just here the impossibility of being right is presented, as the sector

which screams “injustice” shifts from those who previously couldn’t afford to buy their own home and had to pay high rent, to those who previously could and now find themselves to have bought too early.

It actually wouldn’t matter who was Prime Minister or, for that matter, who the journalist was and whether that particular question was asked. It actually doesn’t matter that it is politicians and journalists I am using as the illustration here, rather than husbands and wives, or parents and children, or next-door neighbours. This is how the system of competing claims for justice works, or doesn’t work. The crisis at the heart of a political and economic system like ours is not that one government might be more or less competent than another, but that *it is part of the system that there always be a crisis* – that the competing claims for justice can never all be satisfied, and so we find ourselves subject to the familiar pendulum effect, always trying to guess the turning point.

This is a *theological* effect before it is anything else. This is not to suggest that only a Christian or theologian can understand what is going on here, but that there is a clash of powers here which can be cast mythologically as a struggle of gods (and often has been so cast in the past). There are “gods” (so to speak) at work here – elemental forces beyond our capacity to control – and yet the struggle of our lives is the attempt to control, to name and to harness these claimants on us. Put differently, our struggles issue in the attempt to calculate just where the pendulum is in space and when it’s about to turn.

A few weeks ago we heard from St Paul:

... ¹⁵ *I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...* ²⁰ *Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.*

²¹ *So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand.* ²² *For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self,* ²³ *but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.* ²⁴ *Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? (Romans 7.15-25, NRSV).*

We usually hear this as a statement of the internal, personal struggles we have with right and wrong, but it is about the war of one law with another, and applies as much to socio-economic systems as it does to the moral conflicts within us.

What, then, does it mean, if this is how we are, to “let your light so shine that people may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven”? In terms of our economic example: what is the “good” the government of the day might do which would bring forth the praise of God? It is irrelevant that we are a secular society, and it is not enough to utter the platitude that you can’t please all the people all the time.

There is in fact no straightforward answer here, to the continual exasperation of everyone who finds

themselves in the thick of human conflict.

Yet what answers *will* help will involve an understanding of what Paul means when he answers his own exasperated question, “*Who will rescue me from this body of death?*”, with, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 7.25). What we need in our own situation is a vision of what God works in Jesus. In him meet conflicting claims like those of the mortgage holders and the renters, like those of Paul’s law of the body and the law of the mind. In him this conflict brings death. And *of* him we declare that this death has been dealt with – *for him and for us* – and that this has taken place because of that strange righteousness of God which makes conflict and death the materials of a new creation.

It is for this that *we* give glory to our Father in heaven. And it is this good work we are invited to take up in the world. That is, what brings glory to God is not the mere goodness and good works which is rightly expected of all, but that which *makes* good what is not. The salt of the earth and the light of the world bring taste and illumination to what is insipid and dark. God seasons and illuminates our lives with the possibility of stepping outside our demands for absolute justice for ourselves and righteousness from others and discovering the possibilities of love through mercy, life and freedom for myself through the granting of life and freedom to others.

In this way what we become what we have received – the possibility of freedom and life for those around us. This is what might bring forth praise not for ourselves but for our Father in heaven, because we are simply doing as has been done to us, demonstrating ourselves to be children of God through our peacemaking work – a work which is only possible because God has taught us how peace might be won with a new kind of justice and righteousness.

By the grace of God, may God’s people discover him working that righteousness in their lives, and be freed work such justice in the lives of others, to the glory of God, Father, Son and Spirit. Amen.