

Sermon Archive 256

Sunday 11 August, 2019

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: Genesis 15: 1-6
Psalm 33: 12-22

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



The wise One who knows us well is said to be “looking down from heaven”. I’m not such a fan of the stratified universe, with God located in the top storey and people down on the ground. Next thing we’ll be digging the earth in search of hell. Next thing we’ll be saying to Jesus “go back to where you came from - you don’t belong here”. So I’m not a fan. But I suppose the image of “looking down from above” does make a few poetic suggestions that can be helpful. It suggests that God’s view, with a bit of distance to it, is a view that includes the whole picture - that takes in all the parts and how they fit together. From above you can see wider patterns, broader relationships between things. There’s a sense of more engineered seeing - extra distance giving wider perspective - a bit like the first few astronauts just suddenly knowing from space that there was only one earth so human beings were really just one family. Perspective from above. So when a psalmist sings of a God who looks down from heaven and then speaks about humanity from that wider perspective, we might want to listen.

-ooOoo-

God looks down from heaven, seeing all humankind. The fashioner of the human heart, every human heart, looks down, sees, then speaks. God speaks about the different ways these human beings try to make themselves *safe*. Safe from famine. Safe from war. Safe from death. How strange that upon seeing us, God speaks first about our strategies for keeping safe - for erecting a shield between ourselves and the world we live in. Does God, who looks on the heart, whose perceptiveness is a kind of throne, see humanity predominantly as a running, hiding, creature of

insecurity? God certainly is said to speak of different shields we seek -

Shields. Theoretically in charge of the earth, the king is seeking security in a great army. Within that army, the warrior seeks preservation through his war-tested strength - a muscly arm wielding a craftily made blade. The war horse - the creature upon which we ride (our speed, our height, our advantage, our harnessing of the more obedient creation) seeks security through might. The God who sees from above, who sees with full-picture insight, looks upon us and sees a frightened soldier on a frightened horse, trying desperately not to lose the fight - fearful that it's not quite working - a vain hope for victory. I'm not sure that's how I want to be seen. Leave that image there for the moment . . .

Everyone at Ihumātao says they are there in peace. They are there for korero, for talking. The rangitahi are said to be there, acknowledging the mana of the kaumatua - respect from the youth for the elders. The police force has been there in quite a connecting, humane way. Apparently when sacred songs have been sung, tears have rolled down constabulary cheeks. Police officers have been seen playing guitars and singing with the children. But when one group seems to be moving from here to there, from safe ground to sensitive ground, police numbers swell and a wall of battle-vested chests materialises - because, to prevent a physical movement, you have to form a physical barrier. Physical force for physical force. And then begins the frustrated taunting - the protester saying to the officer "you're not from here; go back to where you came from". (Although that same phrase has been used several times in the White House recently, it didn't come from the White House. It came from the frightened human heart long ago - God knows this, because God is wise and, from above, is seeing.) When we get frightened, we resort to the army, to the warrior, to the war horse. Force for force. God knows well the human heart, then speaks of the shields we seek. The war horse, though, is a vain hope for victory, and by its great might it cannot save.

Also seen by God, from the heights of perspective and wisdom, is Hong Kong. For a long time now, the concerns of some China-resistant people have found expression. It's been five years since the Umbrella Movement began - Hong Kong residents using umbrellas as a passive protection

against pepper spray used by Chinese police. Even when there was no pepper spray in action, and the umbrellas were furled, carried like those which accessorised bowler hatted British Civil Servants from time in memoriam, they were protest statements: the umbrella said “we don’t like your form of government and we are ready”. For five years the umbrellas silently spoke. But since then there have been arrests. Since then there have been plans announced for the extradition of protest leaders to mainland China. Since then, there have been growing physical clashes, and Yang Guang, spokesperson for the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office of the State Council, says he hopes the protesters know they are playing with fire. Sometimes the war of words falls into physical action. Sometimes symbols are traded in for weapons. When the human heart is frightened, it calls on the army. God knows this, because from a distance, God is seeing, knowing, the human heart. And through the song of the psalmist, God is singing to us: the war horse is a vain hope for victory, and by its great might it cannot save.

I don’t like that God sees in humanity, in me, a frightened soldier on a frightened horse, trying desperately not to lose the fight - fearful that it’s not quite working - a vain hope for victory. I don’t like that God sees that; but I can see why God, from a distance, just might.

Abram finds himself talking to God - the One who is wise and knows the human heart. This little scene from his life is prefaced with the phrase “after these things, the word of the Lord came to Abram”. After these things? What things? The immediate thing preceding this was war. In response to the kidnapping of his cousin, Abram had taken 318 trained soldiers, “totally routed” the kidnapping forces, and chased them as far as a place beyond Damascus. Force for force. Swords, not umbrellas. And in that particular “force for force” engagement, Abram has demonstrated skill. He’s good at fighting and getting his own way. He rides the war horse well. But still he’s troubled - feeling insecure about the future. He doesn’t want a war horse; he wants a child. That is the kind of shield for the future he knows he needs. And fighting, being good at the war horse, won’t secure it. In the heart of his human heart (the heart that God is fashioning), Abram knows it. God also knows it, because God is seeing.

God takes Abram outside at night, under the vast sweep of stars we could almost imagine is God's home, and God says to Abram "look!" Look at the stars . . . Count them, if you can! Star gaze. Look for shapes, and give them names. Hope. Dream. Be small in the universe, but count the stars - and when you lose count, rejoice in the beauty - then open your hands to receive the future that I will give you. I'm looking from here to you; you, look to me. *Our soul waits for the Lord, who is our help and shield. Our heart is glad in God, because we trust in the holy name. Let your steadfast love, O Lord, be upon us, even as we hope in you.*

The war horse is a vain hope for victory. By its great might it cannot save, and Abram still fears for the future. The future comes, the fear subsides, when Abram is taken by his hand and told to count the stars.

-ooOoo-

On a piece of land by Auckland Airport, tensions are building. For a Chinese territory, there are flames being prepared. In a White House and on many a protest line, people are saying "go back to where you came from". Push comes to shove, and the war horse is the way we have worked. Are we not, though, we who believe that we are seen by the wise perspective of God, are we not called to find a different shield? One of imagination. One of hope. One of having our hearts fashioned by wisdom. One of trying to count what cannot be counted, yet finding in the wonder of the failure, the missing pieces (or peace itself - shalom) for our future.

I'm not such a fan of the stratified universe, with God located in the top storey and people down on the ground. Next thing we'll be digging the earth in search of hell. Next thing we'll be saying to Jesus "go back to where you came from - you don't belong here". So I'm not a fan. But maybe as I learn to look to God who sees me with a bigger view, who discerns more deeply what the world is, and how I fit within it, - maybe then a blessing will come.

Let your steadfast love, O Lord, be upon us, even as we hope in you.

Amen.

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