

## Sermon Archive 285

Sunday 22 March, 2020

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: 1 Samuel 16: 1-13  
Ephesians 5: 8-14

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Sometimes I'm not sure how I might please the One whom we call "God". Do you know what pleases God? It's another one in the series of sermons: I don't know; do you know; God knows. Let's go!

-ooOoo-

If you open the Bible, and flick through to the tenth book of the New Testament, you'll find a book called "The Letter of Paul to the Ephesians". The letter certainly ended up in the hands of the Ephesians; but was it actually written by Paul? People aren't so sure. There's something about its style, its grammar, the way it sits within its cultural references, that makes experts wonder. They wonder whether it mightn't have been written by a follower of Paul - wanting to share what Paul had inspired him (or her) to think or say or claim. Obviously, the community that brought the New Testament together would have thought about the authorship, and within that nebulous process called "discernment of inspiration", decided that the text had something valuable for the church. But as to whether it's authentic Paul, I don't know. Do you know? God knows.

Whoever wrote Ephesians, declared, quite boldly, that once we were in darkness, but now we live in light. Some, I'm sad to say, haven't quite made the transition out of darkness. God! You wouldn't believe what the people of darkness do at home. It's shameful even to think of what they're up to! If we were to move beyond the curtain of shame, we'd be into the realm of "does that child have a black eye?" "Does that woman look nervous?" "Does that tax return look realistic?" What **do** they do at home? Probably best not to go there, because it's hard to be certain about what we might be seeing this side of the closed doors, and even if we thought we probably knew, what then

should we do? I don't know. Do you know? Hopefully God knows. But that's all far too ambiguous, given that we're living in the light, surrounded by what is good and right and true - having successfully having been brought into what is exposed, visible and clear. So says someone who might be Paul.

Someone who might be Paul, however, then exhorts us to try to find out what is "pleasing to the Lord". You'd think, wouldn't you, that for those of us who have come into the light, that we'd know, almost by instinct, almost by intuition. In the realm of the exposed, the visible, the clear, "what pleases God" would be something that came to us easily - as the evidently obvious. But no, the one who might be Paul presents "discovering the good" as an on-going challenge. "Try to find out", he writes (or she writes), what is pleasing to God. In the light, *even* in the light, it's still a bit of a task to discern what might be pleasing to God. At this point I'm tempted towards the Lenten refrain: I don't know; do you know; God knows.

In a world where God speaks to people in accents clear and true, God speaks to Samuel. God makes it quite clear to him that the reign of Saul, Israel's first king, has been a failure and has come to an end. Sometimes it's hard to tell when things have come to an end, but in this instance, God is speaking clearly to the situation, declaring that things with Saul are over. Now is the time for Samuel to go looking for a new person for the throne. That clarity is helpful. God also is quite clear, in the thinking of Samuel, about where the new king is to be found. Hurry up, says God, and get yourself to Bethlehem, to the family of Jesse. The ending is declared. The place is named. The family is identified. Clear! We're living in the light, where all is exposed, evident, and obvious. Samuel goes off to do what will "please the Lord". Would that it were quite so simple!

Samuel's first complexity, as he moves into the light, is dealing with a fear about how the old, departing darkness will respond. Samuel is aware that if Saul, the failed king, hears about Samuel moving into the process of pleasing God, by finding a new king, there might just be violence. The darkness may just have one last spear to throw, gun to shoot, bomb to explode, character to exterminate. What if Saul sees him going to Bethlehem, with his horn full of anointing oil?

This is where a first set of complications sets in. As he seeks to do what will please God, God provides him with a lie. God tells Samuel to go to Bethlehem

with a heifer under his arm - pretending to be going to do a sacrifice - when he's not going to do a sacrifice. If you were planning to please God, to discern what is pleasing to God, would you go armed with a lie? Is lying part of the skills set to be possessed by those intent on pleasing God? I don't know. Do you know? God knows. I want to think more about this - but there's still more to be squeezed into the sermon's space. A greater complication looms.

The greater complication is that Jesse has so many sons. The king, apparently, is among them, but for goodness sake, why so large a set of sons! Each son is paraded before Samuel - doing a kind of weird Miss Universe presentation of physical credentials. Height. Stature. Appearance. Samuel is delighted, confused, stalling in his efforts easily to please the Lord. It isn't working. He's getting the feeling that nothing, no one he's seeing is pleasing to the Lord. Is he not in the right place? Is he not talking to the right family? Why is it not evident what is pleasing the Lord? Having been armed with his lie, moving away from darkness into light, he's having to "try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord". Try to find out! Try! This is far from simple.

When he reaches his point of stalling, Samuel asks Jesse if there might be one other son - hidden somewhere. And there is. The youngest one hasn't been included on the cat-walk, because he's young and taking care of the sheep. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord - could the answer be hidden away because this is a world of grown men, and young boys aren't naturally counted. Could the Lord-pleasing prize be being kept out of view by our societal assumptions of worth and not-worth? God looks on the heart, we are told, not on the appearance. I'm not sure I can see the heart. Can you see the heart? God knows the heart.

At this point, the classic Christian preacher, rejoices in the arrival, into Samuel's discerning what is pleasing to the Lord, of David. Some non-descript, unimportant little runt, running into the face of classical kingly attributes. Nothing like his older brothers, a simple nothing of a person - yet with a good heart. That's the classic treatment of the almost missing David. And if that were the case, then finding "that which pleases God" would be simple counter-cultural, almost punk-oriented, "go for the ugly". God dwells in the ugly. God rejoices in the "obviously unlikely".

The only trouble with that is that David is just as gorgeous as, maybe more gorgeous than, all his brothers. The story tells us that he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome! He has all the qualities that had distracted Samuel into seeing Lord-pleasing things where the Lord was not pleased. Why seven other gorgeous men were not what pleased God, and **this** gorgeous man is what pleases God, isn't obvious! What makes **him** the king? What reason that **he** should be chosen? I don't know why. Do you know why? We understand that God knows why, and that Samuel is beginning to intuit not so much "why", but just "that". It's something about the heart - but can the heart be seen? Does not the heart lie in the realm of the invisible - while someone who may not be Paul talks about everything exposed by the light becoming visible . . . On your way into the light, try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. Look for light, so that we will know what is pleasing to our God . . . I don't know. Do you know? God knows.

Sometimes, Christian faith is presented as a body of truths. Christians are those who have insights into eternal certainties, moral confidences, solid world view. But as I preach my way through this season of Lent, I find Jesus confusing Nicodemus. I find the woman at the well wondering where might be the bucket of Jesus. I find Samuel struggling to know which son to choose. I find someone who's probably not Paul exhorting me to try to find out what is pleasing to God. It's so much more about discerning, searching, pondering possibilities and applying imagination, admitting that "I don't know", than reading the black and white. I predict that when we arrive at Good Friday, and are confronted by a person on a cross, maybe that will be our greatest "I don't know". Do you know? Maybe it's in the space of the "we don't know" that God will be found to dwell and meet us - maybe even love and hold us. When times are uncertain, maybe God holds us.

Ah well; once we were in darkness, but now in the Lord we are light - living as children of light, trying to find out what is pleasing to God. Along the Lenten path we go - and keep a moment of quiet.