

## Sermon Archive 293

Sunday 10 May, 2020

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: Psalm 8: 1, 3-5, 9  
John 14: 1-10

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Before the sermon proper, here's a little reverie on "seeing the father". As I have done for a long time now, but probably do more regularly since Dad died last August, is Skype call my mother. She sits in my old bedroom at home in Auckland, where the computer is, and I sit here at my dining table here, down South. Sometimes we have technical issues with how our computers talk to each other, but generally it's all fairly straight forward. Screen to screen, we talk about what we're doing, each in our own gardens, and how up to date we are with the housework. She tells me about things she's reading and what other members of the family are doing, what she's cooking for dinner and various other non-momentous things. It's good - and I respond with reports of the non-world-shattering things that make up my daily life. It's all very easy, normal, and natural. On a couple occasions since last August, Mum has said to me, after I've said nothing in particular "O, you looked just like your father just then", or "O you sounded just like your father".

It's not that I look like a 92 year old man, or that I've been putting on an Irish accent. I've just been being myself - the same self that's full of his genes, and was fashioned under his care and influence - the power of the parent gently to form the child.

My father and I are not the same. He was an athletic person who loved sports. I'm not so much. He was a patient person. I'm not so much. He was, I think, a person of quite a pure heart. Insofar as I know my own heart, I have to say I'm not so much. But when the woman who knew my father best sees me, sometimes she sees him in me.

And I like that. And she likes that. It's all good.

-ooOoo-

God is an old man with a big, grey beard. God is sitting on a throne on top of a cloud. God's expression is very serious; well, holding the world in being and to account isn't something to be done with a frivolous expression, is it? It feels like god is fond of saying "thou shalt not", and occasionally sending plagues to the earth to cleanse and purify it. God wears a hat that looks a bit like a bishop's mitre - creating echoes, resonances, between what heaven is like and the authority of the church on earth. What is it with god and authority? God also is very richly dressed - quite a fortune in that cloak - as if god and the economy are friends. Sadly, god doesn't like me much, because I am wicked and destined for destruction. If we believe that god is like *that*, why on earth would we go searching for god?

Some people search for God because times are hard, and things are wrong. If you're a Hebrew slave in Egypt, being treated like a dull-edged spade or a thudding hammer, if you're part of a tinder-dry box of resentment, ready to burst into flames, you'll cry out to God for liberation. You'll seek the freer of people to lead the insurgency for which you are impatient! Or, if you're an African slave in an American corn-field, and you know there's no escape, and you're too tired to run, maybe God is someone you seek simply to sing your troubles to - "nobody knows the troubles I've seen, nobody knows my sorrow - until I sing it - and so feel a wee bit better". Often people will go looking for God when things are wearying or wrong.

Others, of course, go out on the search from a different kind of space. It's that "you have set eternity in our hearts" thing - the sense that the heart isn't quite sitting right, or the feeling that there's something important to see that's invisible just now. Or the mystery of the universe - how did we get here, what's it for, what for us when it all is over? When I look at the stars, I wonder about who I am and where I'm going - it's the existential start to the journey for God.

Or, as it was for me, it was listening to the arguments between the faiths - friends of mine who couldn't find their way back to peace after talking about their clashing beliefs. The Mormons having a go at the Jehovah's witness. The Bahai persecuted by the Open Brethren. The Catholic laughing at me when I suggested that maybe there could be some common ground to be found. Surely we can be friends in a state of peace - surely God would want that, would make room for that, would have many mansions ready for that, if we just could find God - finding God.

The trouble is that when we go out in search of God, time and time again we're presented with the grey old man, with all his riches and authority, and dislike of who we are. Whether we're moved by a sense of things being unjust, or by a wondering about the purpose of creation, or by a longing for peace, we do it shepherded by the basic beliefs we're given at the start by the church and the world - and what church and world give us is the grey old man. And so, quite often, the search stops there. Who wants to find and embrace the grey old man?

We don't know what put Thomas and Philip onto their search for God - although both were Jews, living in a land occupied by Romans - a culture dealing with oppression and injustice. Both were people whose history was full of wars and exiles - the longing for peace among the nations. And who, among any set of people, wouldn't have seen the stars and wondered about life and identity and what it's all about. Thomas and Philip are on their journey, as they put it, to "see the Father" - to find their God. And while the One they're following seems to have found room for them in the process, as if the Father's house had many mansions (for you, for me, for the inquisitive, for the easily satisfied, for the patient, for the impatient, for the catastrophizer, for the serene), they still haven't found the Father - they haven't seen their God. Is it because they haven't seen anyone in a fine cloak or a big hat - nothing sufficiently dour? Is that old man getting in the way of their seeing again? The curse of that persistent unhelpful background belief . . .

Maybe sensing that their time with Jesus is coming to a close - since Jesus has started talking about going to the Father without them - the two men may feel that they're losing their chance of finding God - of "seeing the Father". Sounding a bit panicky, Thomas declares that he doesn't know where Jesus is going - so how can he follow. And Philip, also rattled, comes straight to the point: "just show us the Father. Jesus, we'll be satisfied, if you'll just show us the Father".

"Philip", says Jesus, "have I been with you all this time, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father."

We don't know what Philip and Thomas were expecting to see, when they went searching for God. But Jesus tells them that God has been with them already - in what's been happening to them, as they've been grafted into the vine. Why are you looking for the old man in the hat? If you *did* find

him, he'd only hate you! Look instead at how you've been fed. Look at the friends you've journeyed with. Look at the grace that's been announced to you. Have you seen, have you noticed, how you've been loved - made part of that larger story that stretches into eternity? If you look to **these** things, and see Christ within them, then chances are, you've "seen the Father" - you have found the God for whom you've been looking.

I talk to my mother about cooking and housework. She talks to me about what the family is doing. And suddenly she sees my father, and I do too. It is in the things of life gently and lovingly lived, in the small but genuine things that bless us, in the presence of the Jesus with whom we journey, who assures us that there's room for us in the vine (in the great sprawling house), that we "see the Father" - that we find the God for whom we've been looking.

I don't want to reduce God to some kind of household object sequestered in our space. Nor to one who is banal in ease of understanding. Because on the journey, Jesus leads us into mysteries and things kept secret. Where is he going? How can we follow? He won't answer those questions. The future is still a mystery - which we won't be told - not anyway by an angry old man. But as for this "present" - which Jesus describes to Philip as "all this time", and through which we conduct our search, **this** is where he says we have seen the Father.

Use today, then, to look through today, for the One whom Jesus says is present today - as he lives among us. Look again at the things and the people you see every day. If Jesus stares out from them towards you, then they become gifts of the presence of God. They are means of grace. They are blessings. They may, indeed, be God making room for you in the vast house of hope. And, if they **are**, then maybe you can lose your need to shout out "Jesus, show us the Father". No need to shout - for we already have seen, and we already have arrived home.

A moment of quiet.