

Sermon Archive 328

Sunday 17 January, 2021

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: Psalm 139: 1-6, 13-18

John 1: 43-51

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



In this sermon we have a wee reverie on my late father, and how I seem to have inherited from him an inclination to talk to people at supermarkets. Then we have two Bible stories about knowing and being known. And then - well, you'll have to wait and see.

-ooOoo-

My father was a primary school teacher, then deputy principal, then acting principal at a school somewhat just down the road from where we lived. He worked in that one school community for many years, so was really known by a lot of people in that neighbourhood. My brother, sister and I loved him very much, but it's safe to say we never enjoyed going shopping with him. A five minute shop, quite regularly would become a forty five minute shop, because he'd always be bumping into people who knew him, and whom he knew, who would talk - and talk and talk. And we fidgety youngsters, who wanted to get home so we could ride bikes, or build houses out of cardboard boxes, had a mounting impatience while Dad had conversations with all these people he knew.

Even after he retired, and was no longer at the school, people continued to talk to him in the neighbourhood, because they still knew him (from before - knowing and being known doesn't wither immediately - we don't forget one another straight away). When, after the many years of retirement, as those school connections and conversations became a wee bit less of a regular feature of his life, he - the gregarious man he was - initiated shopping conversations with other people on the shopping rounds. He chatted to people at the supermarket delicatessen, the supermarket checkouts, the supermarket trolley return bays, the supermarket fish counter - anywhere really. He just talked - with his hands, his mouth, and his heart. And when he died, Mum and I went down to the supermarket to find the people with whom he'd been speaking, to tell them what had happened. We wanted them to know.

I think it must be by *nature*, since I resisted the *nurture* (why is he still talking to that person when I want to go home!), but somewhere along the line I have become very

much like my father. At supermarkets, I talk to people - as if I can't help myself. I don't think it's because I'm lonely, or starved of community. For goodness sake, I've got this community here at Knox - and there are a million opportunities here every day to talk. It's just that, probably part of it is that unlike my mother, who did (and does) a **weekly** shop, I do a **daily** one, so I'm bumping into these supermarket people every day. And also maybe it partially because I feel that they, even with a thousand people passing through their check-outs every day, don't get a lot of real conversation - conversation in which they can be "people" rather than "workers". Not sure! But I talk to them a lot, and, in the talking, sometimes they tell me things about their lives. Sometimes I tell them about mine. Knowing and being known . . .

From my local supermarket, a large barn of people and goods just down the road from where I'm living, two sets of conversations come to mind. One was a set with a guy called Boyd. One Christmas (not this most recent one), I noted that he wasn't wearing a Santa hat, as most of his colleagues were. Sporting a good head of hair, and a proudly coiffed presentation of it, I might say, he said that he didn't want to mess up his hair. I suggested to him that maybe, then, if he wore a set of reindeer antlers, he might preserve his hair style but also achieve the required affect of Christmas ridiculousness. He laughed and smiled at that . We talked about other things. He told me, in the long run, that he was a student, but not a very good one. When he told me that he wasn't a very good one, I thought "how sad" - how sad to describe yourself like that. I wondered what had gone on to leave him feeling like that. We know one another a bit, don't we? But there's lots more still to be known.

A week or so ago he worked his last shift at the supermarket, returned to Wellington, from which he'd come to train to be a school teacher - as my daddy was a school teacher. What a good thing to do! I'm so pleased for him, and for the progress he's making. Yet, from the big barn of people and goods, one really nice human interaction has disappeared.

A second supermarket conversation was with Hamish. My first memory of a conversation with Hamish was about how my self-checkout machine wasn't beeping, so was leaving me uncertain about whether I had scanned my barcodes, or was putting unscanned, therefore stolen goods into my bag. Immediately he showed me the volume control on the machine, and pumped up my volume! I told him that he was very clever. His response caught my attention. He told me that he wasn't clever. Again I thought "how sad" to say that about yourself. Why would you feel you like you're having to say to someone else that you not clever? Subsequently I discovered that he used to work on cabin crew at Air New Zealand, and with Covid, and the cancelation of a whole lot of flights, had been laid off. He was working in the supermarket, very much as a Plan B, because his old employer didn't want him anymore. I didn't know that, of course. We don't know everything - and sometimes some of what we don't know is quite important. It was as a laid-off person, that he was saying to me that he wasn't very clever. We learn things about one another - and sometimes about our

tendernesses. He's recently been re-employed by the airline, which is good for him - albeit a bit fragile for him (for who knows how flights will pan out in the next wee while - it all depends on Covid). I hope for him the most very best. But because he's gone back to his old job, another person with whom I've spoken in the big barn of people and goods has gone. Probably I'll never know how things go for him from here.

Nothing stands still, does it? People come into our lives, and out of our lives again. The warmth they bring while they're here, and the spaces they leave when they're gone, speak to us of how we need to know others, and to be known by them. We talk, we joke, we smile, we wish people well because there is comfort, there is something communally constructive about knowing people and about knowing that they know us.

-ooOoo-

Here's an old poem, gathered into the body of what our forebears in faith called "scripture". It's a psalm. It's the work of someone who feels that he (or she) is utterly at home in the arms of the One who makes the morning, who stretches out the seas, who puts light out into the darkness. The psalmist feels a deep security in this great creating One. Now the psalmist doesn't know what he or she will say next. The psalmist doesn't know where he or she will go next. Life is an emerging tree-diagram of possibilities. But whatever, or wherever is next, no matter who comes or goes, who knows or doesn't know us, the Psalmist is anchored - anchored in the confidence that stably, that faithfully, he or she is known. "O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down, and when I rise up. you discern my thoughts from far away . . . Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely." Lord, you have searched me and known me.

So, should Sheol come next, or should heaven come next, should darkness come next, or confusion come next, there is security, there is an anchoring, for the Psalmist, in the sense of being deeply known by One who is faithful. Those whom we know, and who know us, partially or deeply, come and go - such is the nature of being a socially constructed person who is mortal. But the psalmist speaks of finding some kind of foundation for life, hope and faith, in the idea of a great transcendent One who knows who we are - and who knows us for the duration.

Here's another bit of scripture. It's a story of a slightly cynical man called Nathaniel. Nathaniel has been told that God, the great creating One presented in the psalms, is finding form within his time and place in the person of someone called Jesus. Jesus comes from Nazareth, and Nathaniel's famous first dismissive response to this is to say "can anything good come out of Nazareth?" So we can tell that Nathaniel's not immediately open to, interested in, this invitation to get to know Jesus.

Well, Jesus works with that. He says of Nathaniel, as Nathaniel approaches, "here's an

Israelite in whom there is no deceit". He speaks as if he knows him, causing Nathaniel to respond "Jesus, where did you get to know me?"

There's this song, that goes:

*You give your hand to me
and then you say "Hello"
and I can hardly speak
my heart is beating so
and anyone can tell
you think you know me well
but you don't know me.*

Cindy Walker (1918-2006)

Well, if that song captures anything of the spirit of Nathaniel, Jesus responds in such a way to Nathaniel's dismissive put-off, as Nathaniel feels that even something as insignificant as his sitting under a tree is known by God. He is known. And for him, for Nathaniel, that's the beginning of faith, of discipleship, of following the Christ - of finding a new orientation for life.

Why do we talk to one another? We're coming to know and to be known. Why does a psalmist praise the One who knows him, better than he or she knows his or her own self? Why does the big difference, the turning from cynicism to faith, occur for Nathaniel? It's because the holy One is presented, to us, as the One who knows us - who meets our deep need to know and to be known.

That the universe should want to know us - to consider us worth getting to know, that faith might provide others who are willing, no, wanting to share their lives with us, to find a spiritual space within which to grow as love touches us - Jesus; when did you get to know us? O Lord, you have searched us and have known us.

-ooOoo-

I could do a wee preachy bit at the end of this sermon - encouraging us to forgive ourselves for the clumsy attempts we've made to make ourselves known (God knows, there have been a few of those), and encouraging us to be more open to others when they are courageous enough to say to us "here I am, this is who I am, know me".

But I don't think I will. I'll end this sermon simply by confessing to being my father's son, some silly, chatty bloke in a supermarket, and someone who's open to old psalms about being known. I'll end simply by telling a silly story about Nathaniel who goes bonkers because he feels that Jesus knows who he is. And I think for the moment, that will be enough.

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