

Sermon Archive 458

Sunday 5 November, 2023

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reading: 1 John 3: 1-3

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



He has no recollection at all of the accident. Just two loud bangs, the voices saying "O no, our lovely red car", then seeing the airbags and whatever dust it is that comes out of the air conditioning. As it dawns what's happened, he feels cheated of having been able to respond to it. It wasn't something coming. It was something that already was. No engaging, no resisting, no avoiding - talk to the hand! The man who's opened the passenger door shouts at him to turn off the ignition, and tells him that he's David (I think he's David) and that he's a doctor. That's good; he'll be needing a doctor - more so, happily, than the driver of the other car who seems to have gotten off reasonably lightly. Are his teeth OK (not *his* teeth, but *his* teeth - whose teeth)? Not sure why he's feeling them, but they seem OK - in his lovely red car, it's his own teeth he's feeling.

Before the doctors set to the task of working out what's happened, the police officer has a go, asking him to count to five into a little machine that goes beep then flashes the message "pass". It wasn't alcohol. Turns out that it wasn't low blood pressure, and it wasn't heart. Nor was it a stroke or brain tumour - the bigger scanner at the hospital ruled that out.

As the results come in, and he processes what could be considered to be good news (heart fine, brain fine - not dying today or anytime soon, probably), he's got plenty of time just to lie there. On the bed behind the curtain, down the end of the hall, what bloody happened back there? And who was saying "O no, our lovely red car"?

The other car was white. "O no, our lovely red car . . ."

On the bed behind the curtain, down the end of the hall, he has probably more time than is healthy to ask rational questions of a brain that's probably in shock. If it doesn't make sense, then who'd be surprised. The voices (our lovely red car) sounded female, or maybe like children. Or maybe they were a soft male. There were no voices, actually, because he was alone in the car - no voices to be heard.

Some days later, doing medically recommended "light duties" from home, he starts preparing hymns and prayers and a sermon to be used around the table where the Christians will gather to break bread in celebration of All Saints Day. It's the day of the great cloud of witnesses - that number in whose company we worship the God in whom we are never alone. No, we're never alone. It's one of his friend Daphne's favourite Christian festivals, All Saints. She loves the idea of being surrounded by friends whom we do not see, and do not hear, but who are with us, on our side, driving with us in our lovely red car (it's not **your** car, it's **our** car - our lovely car). He admires Daphne's sense of sentimentality, but considers it all a bit mystical for him, really. Maybe the great cloud is a metaphor or some other figure of speech - the sympathetic, the resonant, the people on board with the long frame vision. Or maybe it's concussion - fellow travellers in the lovely red car of whom he wasn't aware. No, it's not concussion, because the doctors told him - no head injury apparent. He **was** alone in the car. The only "great cloud" that was there with him was that dust coming out of the air-con. What is that? He hopes never to see it again, or breathe it again, or be here again. Light duties prescribed, he'd better get on with his sermon for All Saints Day.

-ooOoo-

The sermon text is part of that Johannine collection - that gospel and those letters that bear the name of "John". They were composed by someone who started the whole thing off by saying "In the beginning was the Word". The Word became flesh in the world. Lots of people saw him, although few recognised him for who he was. But to some of them, who did recognise him, he gave power to become children of God - born not of the flesh, nor of the human will, but born of God.

John presents us with a picture of the world that exists (daily life, people living, dying) within a wider frame of eternity that few people see. In the world that exists, people see what **we** see - the regular traffic patterns, the aberrations, the sudden crashes with which we cannot reckon. We see the hard edges that we might, not by the grace of God, bruise ourselves with. All these things are there to see. People, however, do **not** see, this great other world that wraps itself around us - with its friends and witnesses, with its ranks of those who have served and loved and somehow stand with us (shoulder to shoulder) as we go through what they went through as they

worshipped their God and followed the Lamb who came to make them children not of the world, but children of God.

And so, the loving, gentle reassurance that is made in the sermon text: See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are.

And that is what we are . . .

-ooOoo-

- Back in the bed behind the curtain, I am patient number FQB 9645 - consumer of time and scarce health resources. That's who I am.
- Back in the bed behind the curtain, I am an outraged person - that I've had to deal with what already is, that I can't fight against it or tell it I don't want it. I'm a would-be fighter with seat-belt bruises. That's who I am.
- Back in the bed behind the curtain, I am the rational brain, trying to work out what the problem is. I'm a listener to the doctors as they work through the science that will be inconclusive. I am the masterful, would-be arrogant brain, scrambling to subdue the unknown. That's who I am.
- Back in the bed behind the curtain, I am a creature of this world, this view of the world. I let into my lovely red car only those I let in. I don't believe in imaginary friends. I know that I am a person alone. (I know that I am a person alone - that's who I am.)

But **no**, says Faith - no, hush - you are one of the children of God. That's who you are.

-ooOoo-

This **is** all a bit weird. In case he **has** got concussion, he'd better slide into the sermon something that someone un-concussed has written. Sherri Brown, a New Testament Associate Professor from Nebraska writes:

*The open call for a community to live in equal fellowship through believing in Jesus as the Christ and Son of God, and love of both God and one another is a vocation that every Christian can agree upon. This summons to relationship **[life in relationship]** is never in question . . .*

We are children of God, in the presence of the children of God. Part of a love that is bigger than generally we see - part of a company, a solidarity

that is wider than we see - citizens of a country that is dearer than we see. What is time? What is place? What is the car? Only how we orient ourselves in a world with saintly holes in it . . .

The children of God, the cloud of witnesses, being part of something bigger and more loving (even when we're not yet able to perceive it) **is a vocation every Christian can grasp** - says Associate Professor Sherri. Like the writer of John said, some are given to recognise the Word who dwells among us, and are enabled thereby to become children of God. And Faith says to us: Indeed, you are one of the children of God. That's who you are.

God help us, then. Indeed, as we gather for communion, may God help us see the grape leaves carved into the wood of the table - I am the vine and you are the branches. We could miss them, but they are there to see - God, help us to see. As we break bread, may God help us see body. Is that there to see? As others see wine, God help us see life blood? Is this something that we see? And as we see around us only those whom we have let through the doors (like it's our lovely red car), may God help us see the great cloud of witnesses (scattered "among us and before us"). And if the witnesses are singing "alleluia", then may God help us **hear** them as well.

Seeing and hearing openly, seeing and hearing sacramentally, seeing and hearing what the world tends not to recognise - like it didn't recognise him, these lifting, breaking, blessing, receiving things that Christ commands us to do, call us to consider that we are not alone, but live within the life of the children of God. "This table is not ours - it belongs to God". Indeed, you are one of the children of God. Can you not see it yet? But ah, hush - that's who you are.

Before our prayers for others, we (who are not alone) keep a moment of quiet.

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