

Sermon Archive 503

Sunday 22 September, 2024

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reflections on the Sense of Sight

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Introduction: For the tohu va-bohu

The Spirit of God is brooding over the dark and turgid waters, in that pre-existence formless void that the Hebrew language spookily calls the "tohu va-bohu" (תהו וּבְהוּ). What ever could happen here (not even that we can say "here" - for where is here and there in this state of utter non-being? Tohu va-bohu!

The first deed of God is "light", the first gift to what-is-about-to-be is "light". No one can see it, because no one "is". But at the very start of this creation of being, now there is the possibility that that-which-is might be seen.

Not all of the created order will see. The earth worm will respond to its part of the world by not developing sight. The bat will work out ways of hearing its way to not crashing into the side of the cave. One wonderful quirk of creation will be the angler fish, who lives so deeply in the sea that the light from the surface never reaches. So it grows a wee stick on its head at the end of which it has something like a reading light. In a place where no one sees, the angler fish insists on seeing! Bonus points for effort or creativity to the angler-fish.

We, of course, God's homo-sapiens, have eyes - and our using of them leaves us feeling blessed. We open them, and see our mothers. We learn to recognise the shapes of smiles and know when we're safe. We see the blue of the ocean and the pink and oranges of the sunsets. We see shape and form, shade and brightness; we see the ditches into which, now we see them, we will not fall. With eyes, the painter knows how to mix oils up into just the right colours. With eyes, the beloved sees the love heart written in the sand by a playful lover. And the eyes, when seen by others, apparently are windows to the soul - to look someone in the eye, and see someone looking back - could that be confrontation, or maybe understanding, or maybe love. I guess it depends on what's behind the windows. The gift of the eyes.

-ooOoo-

A young woman's eyes slowly (and much too early to be fair - who said it was fair?) had developed cataracts. With the bandages removed, she tells her excited parents, who are all hopeful that the procedure's gone well, that she didn't remember them having so many wrinkles. Not being offended, they're just delighted that she can see them as they truly are in all their detail; their daughter can **see** them.

An older woman speaks to her minister of macular degeneration, and how this big dark patch has developed in the middle of every page of every book she tries to read. With her eyes she had perceived little markings on paper - just typing, just words, just sentences - visual input for interpretation. But seeing these little marks has enabled her to go in mind to Xanadu, to Middle Earth, to 221B Baker Street. She'd been beside the Syrian sea, where Jesus knelt to share with her the silence of eternity, interpreted by love! She'd never bought the claim that "a library is just a building with books in it". For her, who'd rejoiced in her eyes, the world had been open, wonderful and wide. She mourned no longer being able to see.

For form, shape, colour, style and beauty, for visual diversity and the delightful things we notice going on around us, we give thanks to God for our eyes.

Music for Reflection

Lesson: Matthew 25:31-40

Reflection: Looking for familiar eyes

It's such a great sea of people, that you could find yourself feeling "at sea". Among all the strangers, what do you do? You scan the part that you **can** see for faces that are familiar. That one looks like the Queen, but it can't be. That one might be Kamala Harris - might it? What **does** she look like? Have I seen her often enough on TV to recognise her face to face. Well, when I say "face to face", it's not like that at all. She's moving from here to there - not standing still and presenting her face to me. I guess life's like that, isn't it. It's neither a portrait gallery nor a line up for witnesses to inspect. It's a hubbub.

It won't let it stop me looking for faces that I know, though - because in the swirl of people I want to find someone who knows me. My sister, my

brother, my mother, my friend, maybe even the Hebrew teacher who introduced me to the wonderful words *tohu va-bohu*. I think I'd know him anywhere - but maybe not in this river of people swirling past the judgment throne. Scanning the movement, I am - checking the faces. Looking for the look of recognition coming back. My eyes frantically looking for "me".

The One on the throne thanks me for helping him. But I don't remember doing so. I've not seen him before. He tells me that he was hungry. Don't remember. He tells me he was thirsty. Nope. He tells me that he was naked - now I'm sure I'd have remembered that! I just can't say that I've seen him - well, not **him**. I mean, I live in a world of hunger, thirst and poverty; I know what those things look like - I'm not blind . . . And actually, having seen some of these things, I've even occasionally responded to them. But as for him, I can't say I recognise him.

At the same time as I'm pondering this (wondering whether it would be wise to put him right on my not having helped him), there's some kind of protest going on over there. The goats are unhappy that they're being led off to the gnashing of teeth. It seems unfair, in "their eyes", since they're being blamed for not helping him, even though they've seen him. But they don't remember seeing him either. They're not blind - just as I am not blind - and it doesn't make sense.

To help us make sense of it, he explains that whenever we saw one of his little ones in need, we saw him. OK, is there a seeing and "seeing" going on here? Not so much seeing on the surface, as much as seeing deeply.

Some of us responded to need, by being merciful - by doing what needed to be done. Some responded to what we saw, by averting our eyes. Is that what **this** is about?

I suddenly feel that I need to find friendly company. But swirling around me is this sea of faces. I'm reading them. I'm looking for someone I can recognise. The difficulty for me is that I find no one. The difficulty for **us**, is that while we have eyes - there's something important that we're failing to see.

Hymn: There's a spirit in the air

Lesson: Ephesians 1: 15-23

Reflection: Eyes of the heart

Concerning those eyes with which we see the world, but miss to see that "something important", we find the writer of the Letter to the Ephesians praying for his friends, that enlightenment might come - to the "eyes of their hearts". (The woman at the well had said, "Sir you have no bucket". The crowd had said to Jesus "You're not made of bread". Yes, we know the heart doesn't have eyes!). These "eyes of the heart" are those by which we come to understand the hope to which we are called. The eyes of hope. The writer says that it's through these eyes that we see Easter. They're the eyes through which we see the glorious riches of the saints, while to others they seem poor. They're the eyes through which we see earthly powers tumbling and the kingdom of the Lamb rising. Perhaps they're the eyes which see the need of strangers, and see that all important thing that we so far have failed to recognise - the presence in them of the Christ. The writer does say he prays with a sense of gratitude - for he notes that already they've expressed great love towards all the saints - maybe even the hungry, thirsty and naked ones. Maybe they saw these little ones not just with eyes, but with enlightened eyes of the heart.

Light is given to bring shape, colour, structure to the tohu va-bohu. Eyes are given that we can see creation. Someone prays for the Christians of Ephesus, that they might see the world with the eyes of the heart. Let there be light. Let there be understanding, through the goodness of God.

Hymn: Let there be light

Epilogue

Such a gift is the gift of seeing - the miracle of the eye! Form, colour and movement; text on the page; recognition of the smile and face that we know; wrinkles on the faces of our parents; an angler-fish who grows his own little light - mustn't say that the angler-fish is ugly, because remember? Beauty's in the EYE of the beholder! The call to look for Christ in the people among whom we swirl (with all our hunger, thirst and nakedness). Someone praying for us, that we might see the world not just with eyes, but with eyes of the heart.

We may touch on some of this in our prayers. But for now, we keep a moment of quiet.

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