

## Sermon Archive 504

Sunday 29 September, 2024

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reflections on "Vestibular Sense"

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### Introduction: Attempts to "up the number"

The senses are the ways in which we are aware of the world in which we live. They are those capacities by which we perceive what is around us. And for a long, long time it was accepted that there were five: touch, taste, smell, vision and hearing. And these seemed a fit little set to cover pretty much anything we could experience.

In the Sixteenth Century, John Calvin said to the citizens of Switzerland, "Behold a sixth sense - the *sensus divinitatis*!" The Swiss said "OK, what do you mean by that?" John replies "Just what it sounds like - divine sense! You know when you're having a religious experience, and you become aware of the presence of the divine. It's not something you hear, not something you see. It's not something you touch, smell or taste. But you know that God is present." The Swiss said "No, John; it's not ringing a bell". John replies "Please don't talk about bells - no bells in *my* church".

"Seriously, though, John", the Swiss continue, "we get that you use your eyes to read scripture. You hear the preaching of the Word. You touch the bread as you break it, you taste it as you eat it. You smell the incense as you burn it." John stomps off shouting "no popish incense in *my* church", and the *sensus divinitatis* never really found a place among its widely accepted siblings.

Some centuries later, Rudolf Otto gained some attention for a kind of sixth sense in his work "The Idea of the Holy", but he preferred to talk about "experience", rather than "perception". He didn't need a specific sensory mode for God. It's like he knew it was too hard to convince the materialist world that the senses numbered more than five.

Here's the latest attempt to "up the number". I would like you soon, if you feel safe to do so, to close your eyes. This is not a meditation exercise.

When I say "focus" I want you to turn your closed eyes, so that when you open them, you'll be looking at your right hand. You will open your eyes when I say "open". OK - eyes shut. Focus. Open.

I suspect that the first thing you saw, when you opened your eyes, was your right hand. How did you know where to look? It wasn't by sight - because your eyes were closed. It wasn't by hearing (unless you hand shakes and you're wearing bells). Hopefully it wasn't by smell. It wasn't by touch - you weren't touching your right hand. You ***just knew where it was*** - as you would know where your feet are (even though both your hands and your feet can move, so can be in different positions - how do you know where they are just now?) Somehow you have an awareness of your placement within space. And ***this***, so it is argued, is just as much a sensory perception as any of the established five. It's called the "vestibular sense".

By the vestibular sense you scratch your head. By the vestibular sense you don't fall over. By the vestibular sense you know whether you sit, lie or stand. So far, because everyone has this experience of knowing where they are, as opposed to Calvin's *sensus divinitatis* which is only understood by some, the vestibular sense is receiving a wide support. Wide enough even to warrant a service during the Season of Creation at Knox Church.

So two reflections on where we are in space and time - and whether we are aware of where our hands are, and our feet are. Where our hands are (shorthand for what we are doing). Where our feet are (shorthand for where we are making our stand). Vestibular people, wait upon the Word of God!

### **Music for Reflection**

**Lesson:** Genesis 28: 11-19

**Reflection:** *Where* we are, with hands and feet

Jacob's on a journey through a distant place. Far from the major population centres, it's a quiet little region - so quiet that there's clearly not a pillow shop. For a pillow he has to use a stone. In busier places you might stay at an inn; Jacob's sleeping under the stars. It's a place of a strange kind of dreaming, and at the end he calls it Bethel - house of God - because he feels like God is there. In ways unlike any of the

other busier places he's been, this is like God's own place. Tucked off to the side of the world (not really at the bottom) he wants to call it the little house where God is.

I'm spinning the story in a particular way, of course, for the people of God's own country. It may not be fair. But where are our hands and feet, within this global village of ours? They are here, in this physically distant place, quiet by comparison, nick-naming ourselves the people of God's own country. When we call ourselves that, what are we saying? That angels have been known to climb in and out of our experience (not that we see, hear or touch them)? That our God is One of promise, and faithful fulfilment? I don't know. But **this** is where our hands and feet are - in this set of islands in a blue ocean in this part of the world. Where are our hands here (the work that we do)? And where are our feet (where do we take our stand)?

In the 1970s, we decided that our region was no place for others to be testing their nuclear devices. In the 1980s, we decided this was no place to be visited by whites-only rugby teams. In some ways that seemed simple. Today, perhaps the big South Pacific issue is around the South China Sea and how we respond to Chinese gifts around the Pacific (a Presidential palace in Vanuatu, a national stadium in the Solomons - mind you the lucky country and God's own country muddied the waters there with the donation of an airstrip - that's a project to which we put our hands). Building an airstrip may have been easier, in terms of keeping our traditional allies happy, than expressing concern that might result in economic offense being expressed by a major trading partner. Where are our feet? Where do we stand? As things become more complicated in this part of the world, time will tell. Will we get a whiff of God? Will we hear good news? Will we see angels ascending and descending? Will peace get a taste of victory?

**Hymn:** O God of Bethel

**Lesson:** 2 Timothy 4: 1-8

**Reflection:** *When* we are, with hands and feet

Writing to Timothy, of whom he seems very fond, Paul describes himself as someone who can think **back** to a life that was lived in history (the

life of Jesus from Nazareth, whom Paul treats now as the Christ of Faith). The life of Jesus had happened at a particular moment in history - which Paul calls his "appearing", and the creed writers soon would call "suffered under Pontius Pilate" - a time in history as the Romans would write it. Paul also looks out **now** on what he calls the "kingdom" - the way that faith has created new communities, new ways of living together in hope. He has the past and the present interpreted as being part of God's being in the world. He also understands that past and present are only part of the picture. More and more, these days, so he tells Timothy, he's aware that the future is coming. Some who read history will say that the future is coming for Paul in the form of a beheading in Rome. And they'd be historically accurate in that. Paul, however has a different interpretation, a different "spin". He sees his current situation as a "waiting for a crown of righteousness" - not just for himself, but for all who have waited for Christ's appearing.

Where is Paul? Where are his hands and feet? They are in this in-between time that is marked by fond memory, but also by great hope for what will be. So for him it's a time of being persistent, undistracted, fighting what he calls the "good fight". He is present in his world, before a future he believes belongs to God. He lives as a creature in "time of responsible hoping". He does his work. He takes his stand. Hands and feet.

What will they say of **our** time and the world that we have inhabited? They will say it was a time of global warming, when we knew what we needed to do. They will say it was a time of the development of a social-media fed violent global culture, where we could see the damage done. They will say it was a time of stunning rates of change where maybe we had a peace to offer. They will say it was a time when the church either fed into the culture of itching ears being tickled, or stood on the solid rock - not so worried about whether there were bells in our churches, or incense, but love and truth - a cultivation of the first fruits the Spirit grows among us.

O, vestibular people! Where are our hands and feet? In place and in time, how are we present, how are we aware, within our world?

**Hymn:** Take my life and let it be

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