

Sermon Notes

Bishop Mike Harrison

Livestreamed Eucharist 10 May 2020 – Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year A

Gospel reading: John 14.1-14

Check against delivery.

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“I am the way the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except by me. If you know me you will know the Father. Henceforth you have known him and seen him”

Philip still doesn't get that if you've seen Jesus you've effectively seen God and says “show us F and that'll do it”. Part of what the discipleship sermon is about is how do the disciples relate to an invisible Lord. How do we relate to an invisible God, a God we don't physically hear, physically see, physically touch? Indeed it remains a key challenge both in coming to faith and living with God, how to relate to an invisible Lord. The issue of seeing and believing is so significant in John's Gospel that some commentators say the problem of 'not seeing and yet believing' is *the* central problem of Christian existence in the period after Jesus' departure”

So, Philip's question is significant.

Three things about his question, first of all the importance of the invisible, then how do we see the invisible, and third how might we see better.

First the importance of the invisible. The hostile world is quick to caricature believers as those simple-minded delusionals who believe in fairies, goblins and invisible friends. But a moment's thought clarifies the importance of all sorts of invisible things. I remember a spiritual director making this point to me by pointing out an aeroplane and saying how did it get up there. I said, “er jet fuel?” No, in the first place?” He went on to say it was someone's idea, creativity, following laws of aerodynamics and vision – in other words everything that started that was invisible. Indeed we know that most things in life we treasure are invisible; love, relationships, joy, peace, creativity .....

Second how do we see the invisible? Well Jesus gives us a clue. Jesus answers Philip question, “show us the Father and that'll do it” he does so in such a way that the English translation can by miss what he is saying. He says “whoever has seen me has seen the Father” but the word “see” Jesus uses means not to physically see, the verb Philip used, but a word meaning “to understand with your heart”. In English we use the word “see” to mean both things but there's a difference. We see another person in front of us. But when we really understand who they are we say “oh now I see”.

Maggie Ross is a hermit who takes no prisoners in her writings and is something of a prophet – she also writes profoundly on prayer. One of the bees in her bonnet is about translations of scripture. She points out an anti-contemplative history of translation since the Reformation and perhaps before. One example of this she gives as the word “Behold”. Behold can be distinguished from physical seeing – it is inward vision – you know “aha”, “Oh I get it” – the word “behold” is used all over the place in John's Gospel, Behold the man Ecce Homo, behold the Lamb of God, Behold the King of the Jews. A hint of what beholding is about is found in Luke 17.21 The Kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; Nor will they say 'Lo, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, The Kingdom of God is in the midst of you Luke 17.20-21

Beholding is about recognising what is really there – for example the kingdom within and around. We behold when we gaze silently and in stillness, prayerfully and attentively.

In NRSV the word occurs 27 times in OT and apocrypha, none in N.T. In Hebrew and Greek the imperative form occurs how many times do you think? Over 1300.

NRSV in Mt 28.20, 'behold' not 'remember' – recognise, see within.

In liturgy we've lost "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" – now it's "the lamb of God..."; this is a tragic loss because "behold" is itself an instruction concerning the manner of our looking.

Jesus in response to Philip is saying the one who has truly beheld me, who has "got it", who has understood, has seen the Father.

And finally then how do we see better? Well you know God wants to be seen but God does not force Himself on us but respects our freedom to choose to see or not. But the scriptures suggest 4 ways to begin with in which God can be seen and wants to be seen – in creation (Rom 1.20), in personal approaches (Jn 4.23), in the person of Jesus (Jn 12.32) and in the ongoing goodness of God (Mt 6.25-34).

And one final way God is seen – at Jn 8.31-32 Jesus says "the one who keeps my words is my disciple and they will know the truth and the truth will make them free". To keep Jesus commandments, to follow his way, this road of loving obedience is a way to realising who Jesus is – and knowing, I mean really knowing, that if we have seen Jesus we have seen the face of God.

All of which is incredibly Good News – that the character of God is the character of Jesus, that what we cherish in the Son we find in the Father, that God is Christ-like and in God there is no unChrist-likeness whatsoever.

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