

Seek the Lord in his temple

Date: 9 August 2020, 9th Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's

Series: St George's Soft Reopening

Texts: Psalm 27; Hebrews 11:8-16; Mark 15:33-39

"I don't believe in God, but I miss him".

These are the opening lines of Julian Barnes novel, *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*. Barnes' words capture something of the sense of contemporary western culture. We have grown up, shaken off our childhood fantasies of God and religion and faith and embraced the confident certainties of science and reason. And yet. And yet.

The philosopher Charles Taylor writes, "There is a ... sense in our culture that with the eclipse of the transcendent something may have been lost."¹

My guess is that you're here today as a regular member of St George's, or maybe especially as a visitor because you find the building beautiful, even compelling. I had that experience when I came here in 2012 for a job interview. I'm not an architect or a particularly good writer, so I can't quite put into words just how beautiful the church is. But everyone I speak to tells me how much they love seeing the tower from all over Hobart, floodlit at night. It's a treat living next door and seeing her every day. There is still some work to go, but I'm so thankful that we have got to this point where the most significant restoration of the stonework since it was built has been completed.

I've been thinking, what is it that the St George's building does to us? What is its meaning? Especially in an age where we claim to have outgrown the Christian faith.

My colleague Tristan passed me a short piece this week by the Norwegian author Karl Knausgaard. He writes about 3 empty churches that he can see from his house on the horizon.

the churches were ... feats of spiritual engineering, for not only were they a visualisation of a local identity, they also represented another level of reality, the divine, which was present in the midst of everyday toil, and there stood open to the future, when the kingdom of heaven would be established on earth. That no one seeks the divine level of reality any more and that the churches stand empty means that the kingdom of heaven has come. There is nothing left to long for other than longing itself²

Like Barnes, Knausgaard experiences the disappearance of God as a sense of loss, an unrequited longing. What despair if the kingdom of heaven has come and there is nothing better to hope for than today. But St George's is not empty. You might be here today because of the building, but people still gather each week to seek "the divine level of reality". And we're especially glad to do so here today after having been apart due to the coronavirus. Maybe, just maybe, the universe is not closed and cold. Maybe this stone building points to an eternal rock upon which we can stand. Maybe today is not all there is, and the kingdom of heaven is still to come, maybe its green shoots still spring up through the cracks.

¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 307

² Karl Ove Knausgaard, *Autumn*, 38

Our current experience of life is one of massive change, uncertainty and anxiety. How will our economies and the way of life they sustain return when we come out of coronavirus? If we come out of it. Who knows whether we'll have to close our doors again and return to Zoom? And what a distant second that is to embodied connection. For all our science and technology, coronavirus reminds us of just how fragile our lives are. Nations are in turmoil. The greatest democracy on earth seems to be disintegrating before our eyes. Without God, dare we place our faith in our collective humanity? I once heard Britain's chief rabbi Jonathan Sachs say,
 "I don't know how anyone can be a secular humanist after Auschwitz. Without a belief in God you have to place your faith in men."

Our text for today is Psalm 27. The psalmist writes in the same world as ours. A world of uncertainty, of change, of conflict, of anxiety, where his life is under threat. He begins with a statement of great confidence and trust in God.

The Lord is my light and my salvation—
 whom shall I fear?

The Lord is the stronghold of my life—
 of whom shall I be afraid?

Then, he lists those things of which he might be afraid.

2 When the wicked advance against me
 to devour me,

it is my enemies and my foes
 who will stumble and fall.

3 Though an army besiege me,
 my heart will not fear;
 though war break out against me,
 even then I will be confident.

As an ancient king, leading and protecting his people, these foes may literally advance against him in battle. But in verse 10 and 12 we see the more mundane and yet more personal threats against him, the things which he fears: being forsaken by those he loves, suffering verbal abuse and false accusations.

10 Though my father and mother forsake me,
 the Lord will receive me.

12 Do not turn me over to the desire of my foes,
 for false witnesses rise up against me,
 spouting malicious accusations.

What is it that the psalmist does on the day of trouble, when he faces threats both far and near? How does he deal with his fear? He does the ancient Jewish equivalent of going to church. Verse 4.

4 One thing I ask from the Lord,
 this only do I seek:
 that I may dwell in the house of the Lord
 all the days of my life,
 to gaze on the beauty of the Lord
 and to seek him in his temple.

For in the day of trouble
 he will keep me safe in his dwelling;
 he will hide me in the shelter of his sacred tent
 and set me high upon a rock.

Hidden in these verses lie a number of paradoxes. Of course the king cannot stay in the temple all day every day. There is work to do. A vocation to pursue. And yet, if God is the stronghold of his life, then to be in God's presence is to be safe, secure, at home, at peace. The single minded focus, "one thing I ask, this only do I seek", suggests that in all his comings and goings the king would return to the temple to find that peace in God.

Similarly, Israel's God was famous for not having any physical representation. The 2nd commandment is "you shall not make images or idols". How then can the king "gaze on the beauty of the Lord"? This of course is one of the great challenges of the Christian faith in today's world. We're sceptical of that which we cannot see. And as the Scripture says, "no one has ever seen God." Yet the claim of the Bible is that in the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth, God himself has visited us. The temple was the locus of God's presence on earth, but Jesus was the embodiment of God's presence. The apostle John writes about him, "The Word became flesh, and made his dwelling among us. And we have seen his glory. No one has ever seen God, but God the only begotten, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known."

Jesus said, "ask, and you will receive. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened to you." It is through Jesus that we can know God. As we come to him, we will find God. In verse 8 the psalmist says,

My heart says of you, "Seek his face!"
 Your face, Lord, I will seek.
 Do not hide your face from me,
 do not turn your servant away in anger;
 you have been my helper.
 Do not reject me or forsake me,
 God my Savior.

In our gospel reading we saw that on the cross, Jesus sought the face of his Father, but found only pitch darkness. He cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me."

There was at the heart of the temple that the psalmist wrote of a curtain. This curtain separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple. That curtain represented the barrier that stands between us and God. It's there because of what the British writer Francis Spufford calls, our propensity to stuff things up, to break things. Only the high priest could enter there, and only once a year, and only after having made a sacrifice of atonement for his own sin and the sin of the whole nation. One of the artists at church, Maz, has done a magnificent painting of this curtain that you may have noticed on the way in. You can ask her more about the painting after the service. You may have seen that the curtain is tearing from top to bottom with light shining through. This is a reference to our gospel reading. As Jesus breathed his last, the curtain in the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. This shows

that in Jesus' death, full and final atonement has been made and so the way to God is now open to all.

On the cross the Father had turned away from him in anger. Because on the cross Jesus bore the just penalty for your sin and mine, so that we could go free. He was rejected and forsaken, so that we might be forgiven and accepted. It is in Jesus' face, crowned with thorns and pierced with sorrow, that we gaze upon the beauty of the Lord. The beauty of suffering love. It is in him that we find our refuge, our shelter, our stronghold, our rock, our light, our salvation.

Because in Christ the way to God is open, we can with the Psalmist approach God with confidence, and bring all our fears to him. Being reminded of who God is, and resting in him brings the psalmist to a place where he can pray. Prayer is an expression of trust in the God who is our light and salvation. The one in whom we can hide and the one who is the solid rock upon which we can stand. That does not mean we are immune to the changes and threats of this world. Rather, we can bring our fears to the God who cares for us and watches over us.

And so the psalm finishes,

Wait for the Lord;
be strong and take heart
and wait for the Lord.

What does St George's church mean? It stands as a beacon of hope. It is an arrow pointing to the heavens, crowned with the cross. Its beauty tugs our souls, calling us to come and gaze upon the beauty of the Lord. There is a God who knows you and loves you. In the midst of change and uncertainty and fear, will you come and seek him here with us? Really, that's what St George's is all about. We're normal people, full of doubts and fears and failings. We're at all different places of faith and scepticism. We don't have it all worked out, but we're working it out together. We need each other to experience God and nurture faith. And that is what we do - we come to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple. Because we each find ourselves in the day of trouble, and we long to be safe, to be hidden, to find shelter, to place our feet upon the rock to which these stones point. Would you join us in that search?