

(as an aside, I was surprised to find that last night's episode of Dr Who addressed very much the questions that our readings this week did for me)

What do we see when we watch an image or a scene?

What do we hear when we listen to the world around us?

I have had a lot of time to ponder these questions this week as we installed the photo exhibit downstairs and had its opening.

The photos have been carefully placed down stairs in groups with similar themes, portraits taken locally; local history; and then in the chapel images that relate to worship, meditation or solidarity.

Many of the photos have already led to some interesting conversations, but one in the chapel led to an intriguing exchange about where it should hang. One of the photos is of a street near Shoreditch, of a woman walking away from the camera. While it was taken this year, it is a very timeless photo. Elainea was very clear that she wanted it in the chapel, and near the photos of the crosses, and kept referring to it as the 'worship' photo which I couldn't understand; for me it didn't seem to fit – I thought the photo was about turning your back, walking away. Then Elainea said 'but can't you see the street name?' The woman in the photo is walking along Worship Street. For her the photo was about where and how we worship. I hadn't even seen that there was a street name in the shot.

When we look at an image each of our eyes are drawn to different elements; different parts of our emotions, and our imagination are tugged. Some will look at the photos downstairs and see nothing, others will be moved, others enraged and many indifferent.

If we have this diversity of reaction to a simple black and white image, how do we engage with what we see in our world?

Similarly I had a fascinating conversation with my Father on the phone on Friday. Dad was saying that you can no longer talk about religion publicly very easily in Australia. He said pub talk is just aggressive in response to the Royal Commission into institutional child abuse, and particularly the allegations of one particular Australian Bishop, and also the portrayal of IS as the expression of Islam in Australian media, and in particular on social media. You can't say anything about faith because people only hear evil when you talk. Dad was lamenting that he could no longer chat over a pint about his faith, which my Dad has done most of his life.

Dad is right that so often we do not hear what is being said, we hear what we want to hear and go straight to an emotional response – and so opportunities for conversations are lost.

When Paul addresses the crowd in Athens he is confronting these very questions of what is seen and heard. Around him are statues and images of many gods, and he notices plinth for the ‘unknown god’ and he begins to flesh this out using language that they can hear, and an image that they can see.

The opening of today’s passage establishes Paul’s location as the Areopagus, and praises the devotion of the Athenian men gathered (17:22). Then, Luke (the writer of Acts) lays out Paul’s reason for speaking: to declare the truth of the unknown God - Paul’s theological statement. God, Paul argues, does not dwell in buildings, nor is God served by human beings, as though the creator of all might need anything. Rather, God has created all, including all peoples of the earth, for the purpose of dwelling on the earth in fixed boundaries, and seeking after God who is never far away¹.

This section of Acts records how Paul is attempting to get the Gentiles to see and hear God in a new and fresh way; but more profoundly for them to see worship and faith in a new way too. Luke writes in a way that connects Paul’s theology with the poetry of the poet Aratus – this is done to counter the argument that Paul is not just babbling! (17:17)².

When we hear and see scripture are we able to do the same thing? Are we able to see the connections between theology and our culture? How do we address these challenges? Or do we just hear it as babble?

This passage from Acts is often used to ask the question ‘what gods surround us?’ What unknown gods do we worship which distract us from the true God that we know? It is an interesting challenge – I wonder how often we might be standing in Worship Street without realising?

As we prepare for the election in 3 weeks it is a good question for us to consider as we prepare to vote. (Can I remind you that if you haven’t already you have until tomorrow to register to vote!) As Christians we seek a society which is based on justice and mercy, which recognises the needs of the most vulnerable, which allows us freedom, and also freedom to worship. What gods or distractions may tempt us away from these core values of our faith; and how might we be alert to these distraction as we listen to the claims of our candidates. We have a responsibility to ensure that our eyes and ears are open to what is presented, but also that we are mindful of what we standing on; and also if we are inadvertently distracted from our worship of God.

None of this is easy. To see and hear with the eyes and ears of God’s love is an almighty challenge. But it is a challenge that we do not face alone. And this is the heart of the message of our Gospel reading for today.

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3256

² http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3256

After the abrupt end to our reading from John 14 last week where we are told not to be afraid, but to take comfort that Christ is always with us – Jesus keeps talking! And in the following verses which we heard today Jesus fleshes out how this comfort might be realised. For the first time in the Gospels we are introduced to the image and concept of the Advocate – the Holy Spirit. Now as people who have grown in faith being always aware that the Holy Spirit is part of the trinity this might seem odd. We always read scriptures, and encounter God, with the knowledge that this is the reality. But this is not the case for the disciples. For them the incarnation of God, the presence of God is Jesus – and as we will remember from last week – Jesus is about to be taken from them. So Jesus carefully explains that Jesus return to God the Father, does not mean we are left alone – rather that the Holy Spirit will come and live in the midst of the world (and in fact has been present since the beginning of it all) as an expression of the God’s power on earth.

What Jesus explains to the disciples, is that while then encounter with God through Jesus was limited by their humanity and Jesus physical form, this is not the case with the Advocate - the Holy Spirit has been sent for us, and without any physical constraints! The possibilities now appear endless. Through the Holy Spirit, or paraclete (someone called alongside), Jesus although contextually and physically limited, can walk by our side. The spirit is ubiquitous.

It is a powerful promise.

It is also a power challenge.

As much as we might want to deny it, the Holy Spirit is not passive – it is constantly at work to bring about justice in the world. Samuel Cruz, a Theologian from Union Seminary in New York³ reminds us in an article about this passage that when we have the courage to give the spirit primacy – things change! We are given the spirit, not just so we can feel good that God is with us (though that does help). Rather the spirit should help us discern values of justice, mercy and peace to which we should adhere. The Holy Spirit, unrestrained by ethnicity, gender, class and sexuality, guides us to places beyond the physical and psychic limitations imposed by our bodies, experiences and historical realities – it draws us to discern and bring about a transformed society – the kingdom of God. It helps us to see and hear!

We may feel overwhelmed by the political and social problems which face our country and indeed the world. And sometimes it’s hard to be generous and brave and compassionate when we’re afraid, or feel like no one hears you, or suspect that no one is looking out for you. Sometimes is hard to believe God is with you if you feel that you are not heard, left behind, or left

³ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3243

out – in whatever the context. But in the end that is the point of all these readings today – God does know – God does get it!

God knows that many feel abandoned and orphaned in the world, and that all of us feel that way from time to time. And Jesus promise is true - God is with us. Even here, even now. God came in Christ in order that we might see what God wants for us – all of us – health and healing and community and more, all of which are summed up in John by the phrase “abundant life⁴.”

Whatever we face in the coming weeks and months, however we engage with the political landscape in the coming days, whoever we take the time to notice today – the Gospel reminds us that God has heard us, God is with us, but also most importantly we have been given gifts to discern the way forward; to see and hear anew – so that all might live life in fullness – but God reminds us too – that means we have work to do! Amen.

⁴ <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/05/easter-6-a-you-have-an-advocate/>