

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Rev. Catherine Buchan

ADVENT 3 THE NEED TO LOOK

17th December 2017

John 1:6-8, 19-28

Isaiah 53:1-6

I met Michael when I worked for the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago's homelessness programme. Michael was in his sixties, I would think, Chicago Irish – which means not very Irish, but belonging to a proud tradition. He was white haired, upright in carriage, and swathed in old coats. He came to visit us in the church basement on a fairly regular basis, always seeking a meal, but nothing else. We could offer clothes, we could offer referrals to shelters and housing agencies, but Michael would have none of it. He was homeless, and a rough sleeper and that was what he was going to be. The freezing weather we have had this week has reminded me of Michael, because we had weather like that for weeks and months that cold Chicago winter. Like Michigan froze earlier than usual, and stayed frozen. And I worried about Michael. Sometimes I lay awake in my warm bed and thought about him, and prayed for him and wondered how he was coping. I tried to get him to accept a bed in a hostel, but he would have none of it. He would go from MacDonald's to MacDonald's through the long cold nights, sitting in the relative warm until he was moved on, for not buying anything.

In the spring, he came to see us, and he asked if we could give him a cleaner coat. He was one of the twelve homeless people chosen by our Episcopalian colleagues to have his feet washed by the bishop on Maundy Thursday at the service, and he wanted to look his best – or at least a bit better. That was the last time I saw him, as I had to leave the country shortly afterwards. But I have not forgotten him. Knowing Michael taught me something about caring that I didn't know before, and something about seeing the humanity in everyone. In his own way he was God's messenger to me, teaching me God's compassion, just that little bit more. To most people he was just a vagrant, a bit smelly, often more than a bit dirty, to be passed by, moved on, ignored. "Among you stands one whom you do not know," said John, of Jesus. God's servants, God's messengers come in unexpected forms.

Musina gave birth to twin baby girls. She lived in Irian Jaya, in a native village and there the occurrence of twins was rare and suspect. The locals, who were only gradually abandoning their traditional beliefs, thought that one twin must have an evil spirit: if they were boy and girl twins, then the girl; if they were same-sex twins, then the weaker child. The "evil twin" would be exposed, left out to die. But Musina was a Christian and she didn't want to do this to either of her beloved babies, although the weaker one was indeed weak. News of the twins' birth reached the missionaries nearby and they sent me, their student volunteer, with another volunteer to fetch Musina to the relative safety of their home. The walk took two hours into the mountains, but much longer coming back with Musina and the babies.

It was obvious that the weaker child was very ill. For three days we gave her rehydration fluid, we sucked mucus from her mouth so that she could breathe, we massaged her heart, so gently. Musina named her Katerin – for both of we volun-

teers shared the name. Tiny Katerin did not make it. She died before she was a week old. And yet her oh so short life, her life of complete helplessness and dependence spoke to her tribe. She had been loved and she had been cared for, and she had been kept close by her mother – and no evil had come to the home and no disaster had fallen on the tribe – for the death of a child was sadly too common to count as a disaster. And maybe twins didn't come from the evil one after all. "Among you stands one whom you do not know," said John, of Jesus. God's servants, God's messengers come in unexpected forms.

Where have you found God, found Christ, heard his voice, seen his ways, learned his love when you have not expected it? What stories do you have to tell? Who is it who has taught you to be more loving, to be pure, to be wholehearted in life and in service? Where have you had unexpected encounters which will never leave you? I stand up here week by week to bring God's message to you, and I hope it is not a futile exercise. But I am aware that God's lessons are learned, not just by listening, but by looking, by learning to see as He does. I have met God in hospital rooms, where the patient has become the minister. I have met God in school classrooms, where the children say or ask things which open up a whole new way of looking at the world. I have met God in the family, and in homes in this village, as I have been allowed to listen to people's stories.

"Among you stands one whom you do not know."

Even when John pointed him out, most people could not see him. Oh, they saw the man, but they did not see who he was or how he could show them God. As the gospel writer has already said: "He came to his own, and his own did not know him." (1:11) The thing is, we need to look. If the first week of Advent told us that we need God in the world, and the second told us that we need to proclaim the good news, the third tells us that we need to look.

And it is not a one-off looking. It is not like looking for your car keys, and when you find them putting them away safely so that you don't lose them again. We always need to be looking. The one we do not know comes to us in different guises at different times. As a refugee, as a child, as an old person, as a family member, as a stranger. You do not know, we none of us know when we will encounter God. But if we do not look, if we do not expect to meet him, to see him, then we will not. This is why so many people find faith hard to understand, why they wonder how we can believe in God, in Jesus, in God's presence. God does not come to us with labels on.

At Christmas it is easy, because we read the same stories, and we sing the same hymns, and it is all familiar and we know what is going on and what happened two thousand years ago, and what it means to us now. We know where to look for God, because he is in the manger. But where is the manger in your life? Where is the place of simplicity and vulnerability? Where is God waiting for you to discover him, to realise that he is here, and he is now?

Isaiah the prophet wrote of God's servant, and he said that the servant of God doesn't look special, "He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him." He said that God's servant would be the one despised and rejected, the one from whom people turn away their faces. And we can apply his words to Jesus, of course we can, but we should also apply them to the people who pass through our lives, or who take root there and go through life's journey alongside us. God's servant, the one whom you do not know.

If we limit our understanding of God, and of his word to the pages of a book, albeit a very special book, then we limit God. The Bible itself says that the Word of God has become Jesus, not the written but the living word, and the pages of this book we read are important only as they bear witness to him. But the word of God is living and active, and that didn't cease to be the case when Jesus returned from his earthly life to his Father's side. Jesus didn't come to lull us into comfort, into familiar-

ity. He came to be the light and show us new things. And we need to keep looking if we are to see, if we are to see him.

Among you stands one whom you do not know. We find him when we get involved in the lives of others. We find him when the charity that Christmas calls forth is not just giving at arms' length, but is also getting alongside those who are in need, listening to them, hearing their stories.

At Christmas people want to find God. It is one of the reasons that the churches are fuller, that carols are sung, that at least some attention is paid to the story of the baby who was laid in a manger. But if we are to find God, then at Christmas and always we need to look, not only in the expected places - the temples and churches, and in the pages of our scriptures – but also to look around us. How many people would have passed by that baby in the manger? – all of them, I don't doubt, if it were not for the angels and the star. How many people would have seen that little family, camped out in the stable, and dismissively thought only that they must be poor and badly prepared if this was the best start they could give their child? Or who might have seen a poor family and given a blanket or bread, maybe, but then moved on and got on with their lives, giving charity, but giving with a distant attitude. And they would never know what they had missed, how they had come close to God himself and just moved on.

We can't all go to the people and places whose causes touch our hearts. We can't all go to work in refugee camps or in ill-staffed hospitals, or in feeding the hungry directly, and it is good that there are charities who will use what we give to send those who can go and who in going can make a difference. But we can all live with our eyes open, listening to people who we meet, hearing the story behind the story, allowing ourselves to get involved with others. We can live looking, listening, reflecting, praying, thinking. And if we do that we will find that among us stands one whom we do not know, and that one will be the embodiment of the image of God, God's anointed messenger, Jesus' mouthpiece. God grant that we see him in those around and learn to hear his voice. Amen.

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