

Christmas 2
3/1/2021

Mark the Evangelist

Ephesians 1:3-14
Psalm 147
John 1:6-18

On Knowing the Unseen God

Sermon preached by Rev. Bruce Barber

‘No-one has ever seen God; the only Son who is close to the Father’s heart has made him known’ (John 1:18)

Arguably there is no more crucial a text for our day than this. Why do I say that? Because it begins by stating the conviction shared by an increasing number of our contemporaries. Convinced that “*No-one has ever seen God*”, inevitably leads them to their next requirement: “*so, prove God to me*”. And what they have in mind as demonstration will invariably conjure up God in the shape of a monarchical “Zeus”.

Proof, of course, is a language mistake with regard to God. What this text offers instead is a test. After the negative: “No-one has ever seen God”, then the positive: *the only Son who is close to the Father’s heart has made him known*’.

Let me come at it in a more abstract, even if, I hope, an interesting way. Our text takes the form of what is called a *chiasmus*. A chiasmus comes from the Greek alphabet letter X. We are familiar in everyday speech with a chiasmus. One example is the observation that: ‘*we eat to live, not live to eat*’ – most of us are likely to agree with a statement like this, except those, of course, for whom the weekly *Good Food* section in *The Age* is sacred scripture.

“*We eat to live not live to eat*” is a chiasmus: *ab::ba* - not to be confused with a Swedish singing quartet. Our text also unfolds in this abstract way as a chiasmus. It goes like this: first, a problem in the *negative*: “*No-one has ever seen God*”. Then a distinctive Son/Father relationship is offered as a resolution of the problem. After which, the *positive* conclusion follows: God is *now* known.

I can sense your delight: why has no-one ever told me about a chiasmus before!

Now, for the gospel of John, we are far from finished with this chiasmus. For the next 20 chapters following this prologue declaration, the entire drama of salvation will unfold as the way of “making known” this Father/Son relationship. For the next six months, every Sunday will take shape around this unveiling, including especially Trinity Sunday. To this end, the drama itself will culminate in a decisive disclosure: the *incognito* Christ will appear to Mary in the garden. Incognito, because at first she presumes that he is a gardener. The crucial revelatory moment only comes when she hears Jesus speak her name: *Mary*. Names, of course, offer recognition, so the naming now becomes mutual:

‘Do not hold me... but go to my brothers and say to them:

‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God’. Mary has a name - and now God has a name filled with content.

The disclosure of this name to Mary now leads to a concluding missionary chiasmus - which echoes the chiasmus at the beginning of the Gospel: "*Go and say....: I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God*". And the point? The previously "unknown" God of the first chiasmus comes out of hiding - and God is known.

Can we now see why all this is so important today? Because it begins with the mantra of the agnostic and atheist: that '*no-one has ever seen God*'. But then it offers the drama of salvation by way of solution with its revelation of the unique language of the Gospel, Son/Father, and all that that has entailed. With this conclusion, the problem is resolved, and a face is sufficiently drawn in a mutual knowing of Father and Son in what we call Holy Spirit. Only now is God recognised and named. In other words: God is now possible - not as a beginning - but as a warranted conclusion.

If God comes as a conclusion, and not a presupposition, then this is surely good news for a culture which assumes that "*you first have to believe in God to be a Christian*". To which comes the retort: "*I don't believe in God*", which obviously closes off any further conversation - about anything else of substance really.

This text overturns all the assumptions of the culture. It demonstrates that God appears as a *conclusion to a history*. God is not a prescribed *formal presupposition*.

There is nothing new about this: it has been true from the beginning. Abraham, for example, left Ur of the Chaldees acting, we might say, not because of a solid presupposition, but on a hunch - that in that going Yahweh would take shape for the people as a blessing to all the nations of the world. And so, it proved. So, too, for Moses in the Egyptian exodus: the going confirms the reality of the initiating divine promise in the problematic journey via flood and desert to an unanticipated land 'flowing with milk and honey'.

It is hard to envisage anything more radical than our chiasmus to subvert the hackneyed refrains of atheists, that God is nothing more than 'an imaginary friend', a figment of religious imagination, an unconvincing *pre-supposition*.

On the contrary, this text brings God out of hiding - who would have thought to look for God on the breast of Mary, God at a carpenter's bench, God on a fisherman's boat, God on a cross?

But just here today we encounter a major cultural dilemma. Access to this gift of God's coming to expression as Father and Son has now become a problem not experienced by previous generations: there is a cultural antipathy to presumed patriarchal language, and a refusal to call God "Father", just as Jesus has to be renamed as "Child" rather than Son. To speak of God as "Father", it is said, and Jesus as "Son", is simply a human patriarchal projection, now well and truly passé.

But God addressed by our text as 'Father' has nothing to do with the patriarchal language of the surrounding culture of the day, and certainly not for all subsequent patriarchal cultures. It is of the first importance to understand that *the God of our text is a God beyond all patriarchy*, and so is *beyond all matriarchy* as well. Why? *Because Yahweh has no consort*. Unlike every other then-competing male and female deity, Yahweh is unique in having no feminine partner. For this reason, *the God of Jesus is a God beyond gender*. This means that if we take this text seriously, then we encounter the name "Father" as the conclusion of an unfolding drama. It is not a patriarchal imposition, now outmoded.

The reason why God is 'Father' is because he is the Son's originating vocational source. This means that if there were no Son, there would be no Father. And because the Son's Father has become our Father, therefore the Son's God, has become our God.

"Do not hold me, but go to my followers and say: I am ascending to my Father and your Father, my God and your God". With this en-fleshed chiasmus, the radical answer to the problem posed at the beginning has come true:

'No-one has ever seen God: The Son who is close to the Father's heart has made him known.'

Here, indeed, is surely a text for our times, not to speak of a mandate for the contemporary mission of the Church. But first, we have to tell the atheists: we agree with you: *"No-one has ever seen God"*. And then, we show them the Trinity!
