

Getting a Good Look at God

A sermon based on Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12 by Nathan Nettleton, 7th October 2018

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Message

When we want to know what God is like, our primary source of information is Jesus.

Sermon

When we gather here each week to worship God, there is an obvious assumption that we consider God to be someone worth worshipping. But how do we know God is worth worshipping? If the story we heard earlier from the book of Job told us everything there was to know about God, then I don't think I'd be devoting any time to the worship of such a God. That looked like a God who could have authorised the tsunami in Sulawesi as part of a bargain with the devil. A God who would do that wouldn't deserve worship. So how do we know? What can we really know of what God is like?

It is often said that worship is a dialogue – that when we gather to worship, God is communicating Godself to us and we are communicating ourselves to God. Now if that is true, then one of the ways we ought to be able to find out more about what God is like is by participating in worship. We should be able to leave this worship service each week knowing God a little better than when we arrived. And the one who enables this to happen is Jesus because it is, first and foremost, him we turn to in worship and him we encounter in worship, and if we want to get a good look at God, we will get it in Jesus.

Our reading from the letter to the Hebrews said that we can see all the glory of God mirrored in Jesus – he is an exact likeness. God's essential nature is imprinted on him perfectly. There might be things you can find out about God from elsewhere, but the most you can know is to be found in Jesus. So what is God like? And is God worth worshipping?

Well, one of the things that struck me from that same reading in Hebrews, and which we see clearly here in worship too, is that Jesus suffers. So if Jesus is an exact reflection of God, then God suffers. The letter said that before Jesus was crowned with glory and honour at the right hand of God he went through suffering all the way to death. And it prefaces that by saying that he became one of us, that he started out on the exact same foot that we do. It goes on to say that from that common starting point he became the pioneer of our salvation – the trail blazer who leads the way and thus enables us to find the way through suffering and death and beyond.

Daniel, Danielle and Lydia witnessed a horrific accident this week in which a woman was hit and killed by a truck. And Danielle, who usually sees more deeply and immediately into the heart of the spiritual reality than most of us, said afterwards that it was like seeing the face of God crushed into the road. She's right. That's exactly what she witnessed. That woman was made in the image of God and, as Danielle saw, her dying too bore the image of God, the God who suffers in all that we suffer, in life and in the horror of death.

The Hebrews reading even goes so far as to say that Jesus had to become "perfect" through sufferings. Now I may be wrong here, but I'm not convinced that suffering necessarily makes anyone a better person. Sometimes it just seems to make people bitter and broken. Suffering

is never, in itself a good thing. It can't be because God has promised us that there will come a day when there is no more suffering, and if it was good, God wouldn't be getting rid of it.

But there is something that suffering is necessary for. The experience of suffering is necessary if you want to be taken seriously by others who are suffering. How often have you tried to reach out to someone who was in desperate trouble and they say, "Well thanks, but you just wouldn't understand." And sometimes you know they're right, and because you don't understand, you have virtually nothing to offer.

If Jesus wanted to be the pioneer of our salvation, the one who meets us in our fear and suffering and identifies with us and leads us out to the place of freedom and healing, then to be made perfect for that task he had to suffer. There was no other way.

He had to experience the worst that human beings can experience. He had to know what it feels like to be betrayed, to be abused, to be falsely accused, to be grief stricken, to be terrified, to be exhausted, to be abandoned by everybody - even God, to be tortured, to die humiliated. If he hadn't we'd have never taken him seriously when he said that there was hope and he could lead the way. We'd have said, "What would you know?"

So if we want to get a good look at God, we can begin by looking at the suffering of Jesus. We can begin by contemplating the breaking of bread and the pouring of wine. We enter into this experience every week. We see the body of Christ broken in our midst. We see mirrored there the brokenness of our own spirits, the brokenness of our relationships, the brokenness of the hungry and homeless, the brokenness of the poisoned earth. We see mirrored there the brokenness of the suffering God. And we can say, "You, O God, are worthy of our worship because you have suffered with us, been broken with us, and in your brokenness you have offered us wholeness."

We can also know of God that God is forgiving, that God is merciful and will take direct action to ensure that our sins are forgiven, that we don't have to live weighed down and crippled by guilt for past wrongs. In the letter to the Hebrews it said of Jesus that he "made purification for sins."

That phrase draws on the image of the priest who in the Temple had to perform the required rite, the sacrifices and prayers, in order to cleanse the people of the impurity of sin. If you like, he decontaminated them. So when it says that Jesus "made purification for sins" it is saying that he did whatever needed to be done to decontaminate us, to set us free from the guilt and fear that lingers and debilitates us when we know we have betrayed someone.

It is quite different from someone who just says, "O, it doesn't matter," but who hasn't really done anything to help you. Jesus is not just dismissing your sin as nothing, he is taking action. He's taking action if it costs him his life. Jesus will do whatever it takes and cop whatever hostility comes from those who find it convenient to keep people locked in their guilt and fear because they can be more easily manipulated that way.

So if we want to get a good look at God, we can begin by looking at the active forgiveness-making of Jesus. We can begin by contemplating a cross lifted up and words of love and mercy pronounced. We hear those words every week. We acknowledge our own brokenness

and failure and we see the cross lifted up, the ultimate sign of God's love and the ultimate measure of just how far God's love will go to set us free, to purify us.

And in that cross and in those words of forgiveness, we see mirrored there the exact likeness of God, the God who will do whatever it takes to decontaminate us and heal us and make us whole. And we can say, "You, O God, are worthy of our worship because you stop at nothing to set us free from sin and guilt and fear."

We can also know of God that God is making us like God and setting out to crown us with the glory and honour that are God's. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews quoted the scriptures – he couldn't remember where from but we can help him out, it was Psalm 8 – as saying that human beings seem insignificant in the scheme of things, but in fact God has created them only a rung lower than the angels themselves.

And then he says something quite extraordinary: he says that Jesus was also made a rung lower than the angels but that now having suffered death and acted for the forgiveness of sins, he has been promoted to number one. He has been crowned with glory and honour and seated at the right hand of God. But that's not all. It is right after that that the writer talks about Jesus being our pioneer, our trail blazer. Where Jesus has gone, we get to go. His path is the path we are called to follow on. It is not an easy path – it may take us through all that he went through – but it is a path that leads to the right hand of God, to being crowned with glory and honour, and to being declared to be the sisters and brothers of Jesus himself.

So if we want to get a good look at God, we can begin by looking at the generous sharing of Jesus. We can begin by observing his desire, not to make us subservient underlings, but to lift us up all the way to where he is, to the right hand of God. We can begin by contemplating his invitation to us to become his body.

We enter into this experience every week. We hear Jesus calling us to receive what we are and to become what we receive – the body of Christ. We see that God is not just giving us a bit of Godself, but is drawing us right into the inner being of God so that we can become one with the love and joy and peace that are made perfect in the divine community that is the Trinity. We see mirrored there the extravagant self-giving generosity of God.

And we can say, "You, O God, are worthy of our worship because you have blazed the trail on which to gather us and all your children into your own glory. You have made us your own beloved children - brothers and sisters of Jesus himself."

What can we know of what God is like? Even in just what we see, hear and experience here around this table, there is more than enough for us to know God sufficiently to know that God is worth all our worship and all our lives.