

# More Than Touching the Fringe

a sermon preached on the

## 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

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at

### St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

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Lection: Jeremiah 23:1-6, Psalm 23, Mark 6:30-34,53-56

Our toilet cistern has been leaking for more than a year... yes, I know! Finally got it replaced on Friday, by a friendly and efficient plumber called Tom, about 20. We chatted toilet cisterns and plumbing while he got started, then I left him to it. When the job was nearly done I went to inspect – Tom suddenly asked me what work I do. 'I'm a priest.' 'Oh, cool.' 'Cool?!' Tom then informed that he used to go to church, but hasn't been for a while. Turns out he had adolescent years in an Anglican church, one with a youth group, then moved on to a large warehouse-type church, with a really big youth contingent. Unable to resist, I asked him why he stopped going. 'Lazy, I guess.' Now, I thought, I don't believe you, and I told him so, that I reckoned there was a deeper reason than that. Well, it turns out that Tom is a surfer, and the place where he finds connection with God, who he says he still believes in, is out there on his board, in the waves. The truth is that the church's teachings, symbols, and rituals no longer helped him to find the sense of groundedness, unity, and peace which he seeks.

I think Tom's experience is common, and possibly normative. When the religious symbols and teachings are no longer grounded in personal experience they are outside us, accessories, clip-ons, a body of doctrines and dogmas and practices which are external to us. When this happens they cease to hold any lasting and enduring meaning – that is to say, they lose their divinely-created power to transform and to save. The great paradox of religious structures is that they are the bearers of the sacred mysteries, but those structures can become defensive, legalistic, and protective of the status quo. When this happens they no longer mediate the unfolding development which the Spirit-who-blows-where-she-will is working, in each and every person.

The crisis comes when I wake up to the fact that I am trying extra hard to make myself believe certain propositions, or go through certain ritual practices, but they feel like an alien thing, meaningless, ashes in the mouth- or even counter-productive, standing in the way of the deep encounter with God which I seek. And it is the deep encounter with God that is the purpose of religion – not church attendance, bible-reading, and liturgical participation. The latter are to serve the former, and if they don't they have lost their God-given mandate. Our difficulty is that while we may talk about the former, as institutions we tend to be driven by the latter, by church attendance. Tom is not alone. There is a great army out there – paradoxically, some even attend churches – for whom the symbols, teachings and rituals no longer mediate the deep encounter with the Divine Ground of Being – indeed, may even stand in the way of that that encounter.

This, I think, is roughly what it means to be "sheep without a shepherd", <sup>1</sup> who will only ever "touch the fringe of his cloak". <sup>2</sup> For the people the evangelist refers to all have the synagogue, the Torah, and the Law. But these things have become externals, clips-ons, no longer capable of mediating the Sacred Ground of Being to them. That, alongside his assault on the injustice and misuse of power, is Jesus' criticism of the Law and the religious structures. The revelation in Jesus Christ is precisely this – Jesus embodies a direct and personal and immediate living encounter with Divine Ground of Being. And his desire is that all persons, by virtue of their being God's children, are also made to embody this personal and immediate and living encounter with the Sacred. "Do you not know," St Paul, having been grasped by the revelation in Christ, wrote to the church at Corinth "that you are temples of the Holy Spirit?" <sup>3</sup> The good news Jesus announces is that the groundedness, the completion, the deep unity within the self and between all people is not to be found by forcing ourselves to go through the motions of external adherence. Rather, the good news is that every person

<sup>1</sup> Mark 6:34b

<sup>2</sup> Mark 6:56

<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 6:19

may experience, indeed is made to experience, direct and intimate connectedness to the Divine Ground of all being. This is only possible when the traditional religious symbols are experienced as living symbols, within the individual soul.

Now the question immediately arises, how do we experience these symbols as living, immediate, internal, as authentic knowledge rather than external clip-ons which have no life? And the gospel's answer is that we experience this immediate and intimate connection to the Divine Ground of Being in the opposite of what we think we need: "Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake... will find it."<sup>4</sup> Crowds, of course, do what crowds have always done, rushing about the whole region in search of the externalised solution to their problems.<sup>5</sup> But the same crowds who get what they want today, the gospel story never lets us forget, become murderous crowds tomorrow when they become disappointed, no longer getting what they want.<sup>6</sup> Crowds are easily titillated and impressed, as our world entertaining itself to death reveals more than clearly enough, but because they are merely looking for solutions to their problems, merely touching the fringe, and because they seek an externalised deity who can manipulate the cosmos to suit their needs, they remain sheep without a shepherd – and readily become violent.

How can we touch more than just the fringe? The two encounters which are unfortunately omitted from today's text, in verses 35 to 52, offer a vital key: the sheep without a shepherd experience fullness and abundance through poverty in a wilderness place, in the bread and fish feeding of the crowd;<sup>7</sup> the disciples, who are still like sheep without a shepherd because they fail to understand about the loaves, experience peace and calm in the midst of the terrifying abyss, in the middle of the lake.<sup>8</sup> These are direct encounters with the symbols of the religious tradition, but experienced as immediate, living, direct, lively. The Exodus generation wandering around the Sinai Peninsula is no longer a merely externalised, historicised, and tribalised clip-on – these sheep without a shepherd experience themselves, first-hand, the fecundity of the Divine Ground, even in the midst of seeming absence. The Genesis separation of the waters of the great Abyss is no longer a merely externalised, historicised and tribalised clip-on – these disciples experience themselves, first-hand, the creativity and life and deep shalom, even in the midst of terrifying chaos.

I venture to suggest that this is what Tom, and all the Toms, and the rest of us, are really looking for. And the good news is that we are given this living, immediate and lively encounter in the place and manner which we do not choose.

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4 Mark 9:35  
5 Mark 6:55  
6 Mark 15:13  
7 Mark 6:35-44  
8 Mark 6:47-52