

'O God, you search me, and you know me.' Psalm 139 v1

IN THE PEW

I am sitting in the Burgomeister's pew. And I'm looking at something which perhaps few people have noticed in this church.

It ...or they ..are directly across from me.

They are not as big than the others.

And they were not originally in the building when it was a Roman Catholic Chapel.

CAMERA TO MOVE ROUND

THE TWO WINDOWS

Can you see them? the two small windows which seem to slop into the centre.

They were put there after the Reformation....because the middle of the long north wall is where the pulpit, the preekstoel was positioned. It was between the two windows, the communion table was in front of it, and people would stand or sit facing that wall.

The reformers did this because they wanted people to see that the Word of God and the sacrament of Holy Communion were not be distant from the people, but were right in the centre. People gathered round the word and the sacrament. They had to see the importance, the centrality of these things, feel for Jesus present and among them.

CAMERA TO TURN BACK

BACK TO THE BURGOMEISTER'S PEW

But why is construction – the Burgomeister's pew - here?

Well, you find pews like this all over the Netherlands and all over Scotland in the oldest churches. In the Netherlands, they were always at ground level; in Scotland they were sometimes up high, in specially built galleries, called lofts. And because they were built by and for the landlord, they were called the Laird's or the Lord's loft.

These were the places where people of 'importance' – councillors, burgomeisters, landlords sat along with selected guests.. The burgomeisters and landlords were responsible for the church building and very often they not only chose the minister, the dominee but they controlled him. They watched what he did, they noted what he said – and they did so at a safe distance where no one could see them.

In Scotland, the people who sat in these kind of seats also watched to see who was not attending church, especially if they -as lord or laired – employed most of the people.

They saw everyone. But everyone else who were facing the minister, never saw them.

SURVEILLANCE SEEING

There is a kind of seeing which is called surveillance. It is the kind of seeing which happens in a prison camp, where towers are built so that guards can watch what is happening on the ground.

It is the kind of seeing which many cities experience when they hear a helicopter - a police helicopter above, in the sky, hovering over a certain area where there is a suspicion of crime or danger.

in Northern Ireland

I first saw this in Northern Ireland during the troubles. The British army had hundreds of troops on the ground, but also helicopters in the sky, watching to see whether people in certain areas were staying in their houses during a curfew, watching to see who was moving along the streets when they should have been at home, sometimes shining a light on the darkened buildings below.

SURVEILLANCE HYMNS

It affected a lot of people and it made the churches, especially the protestant churches stop singing certain hymns, especially certain children's hymns, hymns which as a presbyterian in Scotland I had learned by heart

God is always near me,
hearing what I say,
knowing all my thoughts and deeds,
all my work and play.

God is always near me
in the darkest night;
he can see me just the same
as by broad daylight.

The churches stopped singing that hymn because they did not want children to think that God was like a spy in the sky, watching out for what they did wrong like the Lord of the Manor or the Burgomeister, sitting where he could not be seen but where he saw everything.

GOD'S SURVEILLANCE?

I wonder of that is – or ever has been – your idea of God....

And if it is, or if it has been, I want to ask you whether you think that God is more interested in what you do wrong than in what you do right.

Because if you believe God is only interested in what you do wrong, you will find it difficult to love God and you will find it difficult to believe that God loves you. People who feel they are always being watched, live very fearful lives.

THE WATCHING MOTHER

I have known many people who feel they are being watched, people who are bullied at their work by a superintendent or boss who doesn't like them. People in marriages where their husband or wife is very jealous and therefore suspicious about what they do.

But I think especially of one woman who asked ,at a conference, whether she could speak to me privately

When we met, she said,

' I am having great difficulty with my mother.
She is always watching me, and always telling me that I get things wrong.

It began when I was a child. If I got 90% in an examination she would ask why I did not get 100%
If she saw me playing games with other girls, she would tell me that I wasn't as good or as agile as they were.

'Even now... I will be going to make cakes...and I'll hear my mother saying, “they won't turn out properly, you were never good at baking.”
or I will put on a new dress to go out with friends and shell say “that dress doesn't suit you.”

'I am always under scrutiny, always being watched.

I looked at this woman. She was at least 68.
I asked her, 'How old is your mother?'

'Oh,' she said, "She died 25 years ago.'

This lovely woman still felt that her mother was watching her.
She could not love her mother'
she could not believe her mother had loved her,

and she could not love herself.

A similar thing happens in our soul, if we believe that God always watching to see what we do wrong. We cannot love that kind of God and we cannot believe that such a God could love us.

No wonder Jesus had to come.

No wonder Jesus had to come to show us what God was really like.

MUSIC IN WORSHIP

2nd Reading Luke 19: 1-10

Sermon Part 2

Begijnhof 9 Aug 2020

ZACCHEUS – A STORY KNOWN FROM CHILDHOOD

Most of us know the story of Zaccheus. Many of us will have heard it since we were young. It's a memorable story for children about a man hiding up a tree. It's not what most men do.

I think this is a marvellous story for two reasons.

WHO SEES WHOM

The first is that Zaccheus hopes that he will see Jesus and then he discovers that Jesus sees him. In fact, Jesus doesn't just see him, Jesus looks up to him.

We sometimes talk about very powerful people 'looking down' on those who are of no importance. Jesus never looked down on anyone, and here he looks up.

And Zaccheus discovers that he is not invisible.

He has been seen.

And because he knows that he has been seen, he is transformed.

RUTH PATTERSON – THE GAZE OF LOVE

These past weeks I've been reading a very interesting book by a woman called Ruth Patterson. She's a saint of God, the first woman to be ordained in the Irish Presbyterian Church – a church which has not been keen to have women pastors. She was a minister during the troubles in Northern Ireland and then she moved on to begin an organisation called Restoration Ministries to help heal people who had been broken by the Troubles.

She recently published *The Gaze of Love* which is a magnificent book. It deals with how God sees people – not as a spy in the sky obsessed with everything we do wrong, but as one who looks with longing on those he loves. She quotes many instances from the Bible, but also from contemporary life.

I want to read this account by a Canadian singer called Steve Bell of what happened when a visitor called Jean Vanier visited his house. Vanier was a devoted Christian who began the L'Arche Community which brings people of different abilities and disabilities into relationship with each other.

STEVE BELL AND JEAN VANIER

This is what Steve Bell remembered when he was only 12

I was playing with a ball in the garden when suddenly the hair stood up on the back of my neck. I sensed a distinct change in the atmosphere. I turned round to see Jean Vanier on the back porch looking my way, enraptured by something wonderful.

I looked over my shoulder to see what was delighting him, but there was nothing there. Then it occurred to me that it was me he was looking at me.

I turned my head back to meet his warm gaze and we remained motionless for what seemed like a long time. And in those few seconds, I was born. I don't know how else to describe it.

We never spoke, and eventually I went back to play, but I have never been able to consider myself worthless since that time. Because I have been seen.

Wasn't that a marvellous thing for him to discover:

'I have never been able to consider myself worthless since that time. Because I have been seen.'

That's what happened to Zaccheus. He was not judged or condemned by a God who was only interested in what he had done wrong. He was looked on with what Ruth Patterson calls 'the gaze of love' by Jesus who made him know that he was valued and wanted and cherished.

MAKING GOD HAPPY

Many of us who are Christians spend a lot of time trying to do things which will make us feel good and make God happy.

That's not bad. Being kind,
standing up for what is right
protesting against injustice
praying for others

caring for others and for God's earth
...these are all good things.

But God is not happiest when we are busiest.
God is happiest when we allow ourselves to be seen by him....
not endlessly confessing sins
not trying to make a good impression
but just allowing us to be seen by him.

TIME TO BE SEEN

So I want to ask you – as I ask myself – do you take time to let God see you....because that is what lets us know that we are loved, and all the business, and all the excuses we manufacture have to be set aside if we are to know the gaze of God's love.

Zaccheus climbed a tree to see.
That personal effort would not in itself have made any difference to his life.

But when he discovered that he was seen.... then all changed.

SEEN BY LOVE

And that's the second thing I want to highlight. He was changed because he knew that Jesus looked on him with love.

The Bible tells us that when Jesus (who had suggested the visit) came to Zaccheus's house, he said to Jesus,

'Half of my possession I will give to the poor.,
and if I have defrauded anyone on money,
I will give back four times as much.'

Some people – and I am one of them – have always thought that Zaccheus, as a tax collector, was a swindler, one who made money for himself at the expense of innocent people.

GENEROUS NOT FROM GUILT BUT FROM LOVE.

The Bible doesn't say that.
The Bible doesn't say that he became generous because he was guilty.
The Bible says that he was generous because he knew he was loved.

The generosity we show because we feel guilty, does not come from a clean heart. It is a generosity we may later regret,

a generosity we may think was a waste of time, because having shown kindness, we still feel guilty.

The generosity we show because we feel loved... that is what transforms us and changes others.

THE PIOUS PEST

Recently I had a long conversation about a man who is causing endless trouble in his work. He is finding fault with people who are doing nothing wrong. He is making statements about what needs to improve. He is being hostile to people who should be his friends, and all the time he is talking about how he is doing this for God.

If I ever met this man, I would ask him whether he felt he had been seen by God, or whether all his fault finding in others was some kind of neurotic attempt to impress God and make up for some very deep guilt or fear within him.

When in a moment we sing the words of Psalm 139 – O God, you search me and you know me, let us sing them not as those who believe that God looks on us just to find fault. God can deal with our faults. God forgives.

Let us sing them as those who know or who want to know that we are held in the embrace of God, and in the gaze of God's love.

HYMN: O GOD YOU SEARCH ME