

“The gift of the gap”, a sermon based on Isaiah 6:1-13 and Luke 5:1-11, preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on Sunday 10 February 2019.

The crowd was pressing in on Jesus. So he gets in Peter’s boat and asks Peter to put a little way from the shore. And he sits down in the boat to address the crowd. There is space between Jesus and the crowd.

A similar action in last Sunday’s reading, but more dramatic. A crowd of hometown people had taken Jesus to the brow of the hill and were going to hurl him off a cliff. And, says Luke, Jesus walked through the middle of them, and went on his way. More space.

The reading from Isaiah portrays the closeness and otherness of God.

Over the last few Sundays I have spoken about God’s proximity - the immediacy of God’s word, the urgency of God’s future, the power of God’s Spirit for action today. The emphasis has been on closeness. This morning I want to explore the gift of distance between God and us, between Jesus and us.

We often emphasise nearness. When people face a challenge, and feel alone or vulnerable or isolated, it is common to speak of Jesus being alongside us. We speak of Jesus as a companion, a presence, a support, a friend. We emphasise the solidarity of Jesus with us, the sharing of our experience, his oneness with our being.

When distance is spoken of, it is often negative. God feels distant, perhaps produced by an inability to overcome a persistent failing or because of an experience of shame.

It is here in our reading. When the catch of fish is greater than Peter could have imagined, and he is amazed at what has happened, he is overcome with shame at his lack of faith. And what does he say – “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.”

Maybe he was irritated to be sent out fishing when they were already tired and exhausted from fishing. And Jesus was meant to be a carpenter, not a fisher! Maybe he could never imagine such a bounteous catch, and was convicted of his lack of vision. Or maybe Peter realised that the local people weren’t going to get much of the fish anyway. The Roman Empire exported most of the fish, and imposed taxes and levies on the fishermen. Maybe Peter was doing the calculations of how much this fish was going to cost him. And he recognised the distance between the way he thought and the way Jesus thought.

What though of the gift of distance?

When crowds press in only a small number can be addressed.

Last week, a friend described travelling on a Tokyo commuter train. The crowd so pressed in that she travelled nose to nose with her husband. No room to move. No space to speak with other than one person.

When he's out from the shore, it is more than Jesus and me. It's Jesus and all these other people, including me. It's Jesus and a whole range of cultures, including mine. It's Jesus and many languages, including mine. He stands away in order to address us all.

Our architecture takes up the symbolism of being in a boat, of the Word coming to us from beyond the crowd.

The main part of a church is called a nave from navis which is the Latin word for ship, which is an early Christian symbol of the Church as a whole. In some languages – Danish and Swedish for example - the same word is used for nave and ship. In a small boat, a pulpit is a safety rail rising from the deck near the bow, and extending around it.

In Moby Dick, Herman Melville describes Father Mapple entering the pulpit – “Yes, the world's a ship on its passage out, and not a voyage complete; and the pulpit is its prow.”

The Word of God is not the product of the crowd pressing in. It is not the consensus of those closest to us. It comes from outside us, from a distance, free of us, bigger than us. So the nave. So the pulpit.

One of my great fears when first joining the church was falling into credulity. I was afraid that by becoming Christian I would be taken over by narrow-minded group think. I did not want to join a group of people who reinforced their own views and who became sectarian.

My family of atheists and agnostics was a gift in that respect. A healthy scepticism, an offering of alternative perspectives, a family who loved me and did not believe what I believed. They were a gift that helped me think through to what I was committing myself.

Distance allows us to hear voices from the side.

A world-wide family of scholars who in dialogue can correct each other's perspectives. One of my friends, a minister in the Uniting Church in Australia, grew up in China and brings a Chinese perspective to faith. He wrote a book about Dao and Plato called the One and Many and sought to counter the western inclination to analyse by dividing, by categorising, that can seep through into our approach to Christianity.

Jesus gives us space to hear partners from beyond the church.

Scholars of the Abrahamic faiths, Islam, Judaism and Christianity, are studying the Bible together, noticing the differences, wondering about the particular histories of our interpretation. It helps Christians discover truths in the Bible they may not have previously seen.

The distance of Jesus opens out possibilities the pressing crowd, the close in crowd, closes down.

But we need to be careful that Jesus is not kept too distant for too long. .

Christian parents often have to negotiate the space with their children. Some parents have decided not to have their child baptised because they want them to make up their own mind. I understand the principle. But the space between Jesus and us is not empty space. There are many other gods and philosophies and frameworks and world views to fill the space. And for Christian parents, faith is something lived out, day by day, which inevitably influences. Baptism is naming the presence of Jesus with us from birth.

The gift of distance. The fishers were so close to their fishing they did not want to go out again. They had been there before. Familiar work. Familiar lake. Familiar place. Small catches. Hard work. But from a distance Jesus saw what they could not see. More than enough fish, but in a deeper place. In the Bible, water is often associated with chaos. A deeper place, where no one is in control. They needed to go there. And they were amazed at the catch.

The distance invites us to walk it. When I was 16 I went with our youth group to a Billy Graham crusade at Western Springs Stadium in Auckland. Billy Graham was an American evangelist who was widely known in the middle of the last century. There were a good number of us – perhaps 20 or so. These were friends I had known since

childhood. We had grown up together. We sat near the back of the stadium. Thousands of people sat in front. There came the time when Graham invited those who wanted to give their lives to Jesus to come forward. I felt he was addressing me. None of my friends moved. None of them appeared interested. But inside me, I wanted to move. But it meant I had to walk past all these friends, and I thought about what they would make of it. And so I began the long walk forward. And the longest part of the walk were those first few steps past my friends, past what I imagined they thought of me, past what I thought they would say when they got home.

There is a distance between Jesus and us. That distance is a gift. And there are many times, when we are called to walk that distance, which is what Christian faith is.

“When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.”

KNOX CHURCH, DUNEDIN
called to be a community of Jesus



Knox Church
5449 George Street
Dunedin
New Zealand
Ph. (03) 477 0229
www.knoxchurch.net

Kerry Enright: 027 467 5542, minister@knoxchurch.net

