



God's Absent Presence
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Year B, Ordinary 28
Job 23:1-9, 16-17; Mark 10:17-31
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Job's at the bottom of the barrel, a young man, faithful in his religious observance, is left bewildered. Each of the main characters in today's readings is upended. They live faithful and observant, careful to align with the ways of God as known to them lives, and they're turned on their heads. Both indwell a world of God presence they **thought** they knew. Just as we gathered here have some sense of God presence in the world. We may struggle with the 'God' label, but kind of assume God presence as a thing.

A few years ago, while working at the Cathedral, Prince William was visiting New Zealand, I think with the Lion's Rugby tour. He happened to come to a Sunday service at the Cathedral. It was an 'unofficial' visit so no advertising was permitted ... but my then 16-year-old daughter found out and invited a friend to come. The week following, she told me how she'd had to provide her friend with a running commentary of what was happening in the service. Her friend had never encountered anything to do with God or church so she'd no idea what was going on or what anything meant. My daughter said, "I didn't realise how much I knew. I mean it's like it's just part of me without really thinking about it." This friend of hers had already had to face a whole number of really challenging things in her young life. It made me wonder how she negotiated them without a God 'larger than just this life' context. It also made me aware of my assumption

of God presence in life. It's hard to imagine otherwise, so for me to be mindful not to presume this is so for everyone.

Job of last week wouldn't curse God, despite the physical ailments inflicted upon him. This week Job is in deepest despair at the aching absence of God. Job unsays the reassurance of Psalm 139. In all the ways God's meant to be present God is absent. If only there was something Job could do, some way he could argue his case, he's terrified at the God **absence he cannot escape**. "God has made my heart faint; the Almighty has terrified me; If only I could vanish in darkness, and thick darkness would cover my face!" If only it were possible to escape the potency of God's absent presence.

There'll be times in our life when God absence is very real, when certainty of God flees and faith seems ludicrous. Bewildered, for there's nothing we can do, we wish we could flee the overwhelming absent presence of God.

Such things make sense, relate to the experience of those of us who inhabit a God presence world. However, like my daughter's friend, we now live in a world where many don't know what we're talking about when it comes to God stuff. A world where God's neither familiar nor even known to many.

It made me think of a conversation I had a number of years ago with a woman who'd come to talk to me about getting her baby baptised. As her story unfolded, I learned she'd been raised in a family where there was no conversation or engagement about God or bible stories or church. This was intentional, her parents had suffered at the hands of the church. In early adulthood, while working around the sea of Galilee, she started to hear stories about Jesus, stories located in the surrounding landscape. As she heard the stories, she came to realise how many of them, the anecdotes and imagery of them populated the everyday language of her growing up. Reflecting back, she

remembered as a youngster not really understanding turns of phrase or images or anecdotal references that people freely used, she didn't know what was meant or being talked about. She felt as if she'd missed a whole level of nuance and meaning. She didn't want her little one to miss this richness as they grew up.

What if this is the opposite way around now? That people **don't** know what we're talking about when we reference biblical sayings, images, gospel anecdotes. What does it look like to articulate faith – God presence – in a world where we can't presume this is known? Where God absence is the norm rather than moments of God absent presence. Not to deny our own experience of God presence but maybe to teach us not to presume. We're no longer bearers of a dominant, dominating story. To tell it, we may need to unstitch our certainty and learn anew how to articulate and enact what we know.

It made me think of the young man in today's gospel. We don't know he's rich until the very end of the story. An exemplar of faith, all his life he's lived faithfully according to the commandments. They provide him certainty, a foundation upon which to build a life aligned with God. We learn this young man seeks to inherit eternal life, only to learn his wealth, sign of God's favour, has become his stumbling block. It is utterly bewildering.

To set a plan, be obedient to the rules is all well and good and may lend us some certainty. But the focus can end up being all about us, rather than the enacting of the life of God in the world. Jesus' teaching to the disciples is perplexing, upending. Peter, like the young man, wants some certainty, some reassurance they've made the right choice. Yes, well, kind of. Certainty continues to be elusive. Jesus suggests learning to give up the things we're most attached to, including that God who makes us feel secure and provides certainty, may be the way to encounter the living **God**, rather than our **idea** of God.

An interesting proposition to consider as we face a time in our history, a time in the life of the church, where the idea of God in the society in which we're embedded, is uncertainly known. Forfeiting certainty and assumed dominance is unnerving and frightening.

We do have place and a story to tell, an alternative way to live, that is valuable. The credibility of this story, perhaps in part **because** of its association with church, can no longer be assumed. So, when we speak, we need to do so honestly, without guile, to know **who** we are in the telling, **what** we seek to articulate and why. The words we use deeper than intellectual propositions, emerging from our living this way and through genuine engagement. Not with a rhetoric of persuasion but simply of what we know, the difference, the influence of God presence that changes how we live. A difference made known through the way we are, how we are in the world – not because we've dominance or power. The gospels, the Jesus stories, God presence becomes articulated, understood through who and how we are. As, with humility, we genuinely, quietly yet powerfully live out this alternative way. Engaging, participating, using our skills, capacities and abilities to influence, to act to make real the gospel aligned God infused world.