

BETWEEN THE DREAMING AND THE COMING TRUE

Watching and Waiting

I sat in a deckchair. I held an umbrella. As people entered they wondered what on earth was going on. Occasionally you see some strange things in church – but this?! Eventually someone plucked up the courage to ask: “What are you doing?”

“I’m watching and I’m waiting!”

In front of me was an Almond Tree. It turns out, I was in church, sitting in a deck chair, holding an umbrella, watching and waiting for the Almond Tree to blossom.

Why was I doing that?

Jeremiah had been told by God he would be a prophet to Israel and to the nations. Jeremiah was not convinced. He was young and afraid, but God had chosen Jeremiah to proclaim his grace and mercy to the people of Israel and to the nations. That would be a hard message for them to hear, but it was the message God waited to speak to them. Jeremiah had a vision.

¹¹ The word of the LORD came to me: “What do you see, Jeremiah?”

“I see the branch of an Almond tree,” I replied.

¹² The LORD said to me, “You have seen correctly, for I am watching to see that my word is fulfilled. (Jeremiah 1 v 11-12)

Jeremiah sees an Almond tree. In Anathoth where Jeremiah was born, the Almond blossom was the first sign of spring. It was always the first to blossom. When God spoke to Jeremiah there was blossom on the Almond tree. Spring brings the promise of summer.

In his response to Jeremiah, God uses a play on words that help Jeremiah as he follows God. In Hebrew the words for almond and watching sound very similar. In fact, they come from the same word, the word for watching or waking. The Almond tree is the waking tree – the first one to wake up after the winter. It was also the watching tree – the tree you watched to see the coming of spring.

God's point to Jeremiah: God is wide awake – he is not asleep; he does not slumber; he never goes into hibernation; he is still on watch; he is wide awake, watching and waiting. God is watching to ensure that everything he promised comes to pass. God is watching to make sure his word is fulfilled. To Jeremiah, God is saying that not one of the words he hears God speak will get lost or wander off. Not one. He will bring each word to some kind of living completion.

God is saying he is doing everything he promised to do and that even when it looks like he is doing nothing, he is waiting for his word to burst into flower. His word is not dead, never dead, it is alive – and it is starting to blossom. God is saying you can no more prevent God's word being fulfilled than you can prevent an Almond tree blossoming in spring. And every spring, when he saw the Almond tree blossom, Jeremiah would be reminded of that deep truth.

Perhaps today, right now in these moments, you are watching and waiting. Perhaps God has spoken to you and you are watching and waiting for God's words to blossom. Perhaps it feels like nothing is happening, and you need to hear again the promise of the Almond tree. Perhaps you need to hear again that you can no more prevent God's word being fulfilled than you can prevent an Almond tree blossoming in spring.

God's words do not wander off; they are never lost, not one! God is doing everything he promised to do.

In another time and another place, the people of Israel are watching and waiting.

Psalm 123

¹⁻⁴ I look to you, heaven-dwelling God,
look up to you for help.

Like servants, alert to their master's commands,
like a maiden attending her lady,
We're watching and waiting, holding our breath,
awaiting your word of mercy.

Mercy, GOD, mercy!

We've been kicked around long enough,
Kicked in the teeth by complacent rich men,
kicked when we're down by arrogant brutes. (The Message)

Like servants – we're watching and waiting (v2). Jeremiah was a servant of the living God. The people of Israel were servants of the living God. We today, as followers of Christ, are servants of the living God. Perhaps in Psalm 123, we see what it is to live, between the dreaming and the coming true, as a servant.

Living as a servant of the living God begins in the place of looking up.

Psalm 123 v 1

I look to you, heaven dwelling God, look up to you for help. (Message)

I lift my eyes to you, to you who sits enthroned in heaven (NIV)

This is a way of saying that God is far bigger than we are. It is a way of saying that God is above us in every aspect of its meaning. We don't look across at God and we don't look down to God. It's a way of saying God is beyond us: beyond our understanding and beyond our imagining.

As people of faith, as servants of God, we look up to God and, as we are watching and waiting it's really important to hold the posture of looking up to God. Friends, maybe it's just me, but it seems it is really easy to forget to 'look up' to God.

Jesus said he had come to be a servant. And, often, I tend to treat him in just that way – as my servant. I find I want God to do things for me: I call on him as the expert to solve my problems or the challenges I face. One writer writes of those who lobby around in the courts of the Almighty for special favours, plucking at his sleeve, pestering him with requests! Truth is, that can be me. But God is not my servant. I am his. Jesus did not become a servant so that we could order him around, but so that we could join him in a redemptive life – living in the kingdom of the heavens.

Our Vision Statement says: 'We will love without limits.' One of our thrusts – the way we will walk towards that vision is 'Looking Up.' It says: 'We will be people who are continually seeing and knowing God's transforming love as we

follow him wholeheartedly.’ What we are saying is that we live in the magnificent story of God’s great love which is far bigger and far better than anything we can see in front of us. It is saying we will always look to and live in, that story. It is saying that if God is God at all, he must know more than we do, see more than we do, hear more than we do and love more than we do – he must be a God we look up to. And, it is saying, that as we look up to God, in his far bigger and far better story, we will know and see his love in our lives and the lives of others. It is a way of saying that as servants of the living God, we will join him in a redemptive life to reach our full redemptive potential.

Friends, let us always lift our eyes and look up to God.

Perhaps part of our problem with living as servants is our expectations of what God will do. In truth we cannot and will never be able to define God, to fully capture everything he is or does, but it’s not that we know nothing about him. And Psalm 123 reminds us that God is the God of mercy and that we can expect mercy: “We’re watching and waiting, holding our breath, awaiting your word of mercy. Mercy, God, Mercy! (The Message)

The deep and profound truth about God is that he does not treat us as we deserve, but according to his love that has no limit. He is the potter at work with the clay. As Jeremiah learned, no potter ever made a pot to be useless. Ever. Never ever. Jeremiah was being reminded that God had made him, and made him unique and had something vitally important and significant to do in God’s bigger and better story.

And God’s mercy is at work in you. God is the potter who is always at work for good in the lives of those who love him and serve him. God is the potter who, in his mercy, is always at work for good in your life. Your life has a beauty to the potter that no other life has. You are wonderfully unique, usefully unique and beautifully so, in the hands of the potter – the one you ‘look up’ to.

The clay makes a difference to the work of the potter. Mercy is not about getting what we want or being rewarded for our goodness or looking better

than others. Mercy is a cry to put ourselves in the hand of the potter who is always at work for good, and longs for us to reach our full redemptive potential. Mercy puts the clay on the wheel and allows the potter to shape and mould a pot of beauty and uniqueness. Mercy invites God to come to us now and work in us and through us, as we live between the dreaming and the coming true.

Our second thrust is 'Looking In': 'We will be a community who are fully using our gifts and fully equipped to serve on another in love.' Perhaps, as we cry Mercy and allow God to shape us and mould us, we bring our beauty and uniqueness into this community of God's people. And as we do that and live our redemptive potential in front of one another, we begin more and more to reflect God's love that has no limit.

Historically being a servant is mostly not a good thing. It has most often been about power and oppression. What people want, desire and strive for is freedom. But when we live without reference to God, we end up being enslaved to something. And in the bigger and better story of God, the best way to live is to live in that bigger and better story - to live in the truth about God.

We recognize the words of Psalm 123 v 4:

Kicked in the teeth by complacent rich men,
kicked when we're down by arrogant brutes. (The Message)

We know what that's like – we experience a world that reflects those words. But we choose to live in the truth of God's bigger and better story in the midst of a world that can be critical and challenging... to live as servants of the living God.

There is nothing in this Psalm that talks about serving others – it is all about living as a servant to God. But, by looking up to God and allowing his mercy to be at work in us, serving others becomes a natural way of life.

Romans chapters 12 - 16 are a fantastic exposition of Psalm 123.

Romans 12 v 1 says:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.

The Message version says it this way: "So, here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going to work and walking around life – and place it before God as an offering."

It is the invitation to live out your life before God, in the things you do, in the places you go, in front of the people you meet. That's what Jesus did, as a servant of the Living God.

Our third thrust as we walk towards our vision of love without limit is "Looking out." It says – "We will be people who fearlessly proclaim God's magnificent love, always and everywhere." As we look up to God and allow his mercy to be in us, we find ourselves living out the magnificent story of God's limitless love. And maybe it looks like this.

You know, when we met, I began to discover a new vulnerability, a warmth and a lack of pretence that impressed me. I saw in you a thriving spirit – no signs of internal stagnation anywhere. I could tell you were a growing person and I liked that. I saw you had strong self-esteem, not based on the fluff of self-help books, but on something a whole lot deeper. I saw that you lived by conviction and priorities and not just by convenience, selfish pleasure and financial gain. And I had never met anyone like that before.

I felt a depth of love and concern as you listened to me and didn't judge me. You tried to understand me, you demonstrated kindness and generosity – and not just to me, but to other people as well.

And you stood for something. You were willing to go against the grain of society and follow what you believed to be true, no matter what people said, and no matter how much it cost you. And for those reasons and a whole host of others, I found myself really wanting what you had.

Now that I've become a Christian, I wanted to write to tell you I'm grateful beyond words for how you lived out your Christian life in front of me.

Friends, we too are watching and waiting for the Almond tree to burst into flower.

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