

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

Sermon

10 June 2012, Pentecost +2, Rev. Anneke Oppewal,  
Mark 3: 20-27, Psalm 138, 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1



**“Not what we see...”**

I don't know how many of you watched the Queen's Jubilee concert at Buckingham Palace and saw the British band Madness play “Our House” on the roof of Buckingham Palace (see: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6BEW2LuX3-M> or on our facebook page). It was near the end of the concert.

It wasn't the band playing on the roof that caught my attention. What caught my attention was what happened to Buckingham Palace while they were playing. That, as well as the face of the Queen, throughout the concert connected to the lectionary readings for this morning. Paul says: “because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal”.

What happened was that Buckingham Palace got houses and streetscapes projected onto it while the band was playing. Streets, terraces, flats, apartment buildings, places where people live, outside and in, with traffic driving past, pedestrians on the sidewalk, walls folding away to show the inside of rooms etc. It showed something that wasn't there, but was, temporarily, on the front of something else that may not be eternal, but stands for what many would regard as nearly eternal: the main residence of the British royal family. It was very cleverly done and had a wonderful wow factor for the thousands that were attending the concert and the millions watching it on television all over the world.

It wasn't the only extraordinary thing though. There was something else. Something I found moving as well as disturbing. And also about seeing and not seeing, visible and not visible, about what was on the surface and what was hidden underneath. The stiff upper lip. In most glimpses we got from the Queen she was not showing any emotion. The princes and princesses were clearly enjoying the music, while the Archbishop of Canterbury seemed to be looking mostly bemused, but the Queen?

I wondered if she would have liked the music. I imagine the first part of the concert would probably have suited her more than the later, pop music part. But on other occasions she seemed able to suffer music another generation enjoys, with a smile. Was the weather getting to her? Was she cold? At her age, she must have been suffering, out on a dark, wet, cold night. But then we know she has suffered worse and still smiled unperturbed by what the English weather has thrown at her.

It may have been something else. Something hidden behind the stiff upper lip, the inscrutable face of a monarch who has learned to hide her feelings and get on with the job no matter what. I wondered. When Prince Charles thanked everyone at the end and made mention of his father in hospital I wondered just how sick he was, and how anxious the Queen is on his behalf. Sixty years on the throne with him right next to her is a long time, and she must have missed him terribly at that moment. I think most of us would be able to imagine that even when the doctors tell you it will be alright, a ninety-one year old in hospital is something that tends to occupy your mind a bit, especially if it is someone whom you love and who has been close to you for the longest part of your life.

What did we see? And what was really there? As the video imagery cleverly layered on the front of Buckingham palace covered what was underneath, but not completely, the Queen's face did not show what she was feeling sitting there for hours in the dark, wet night being serenaded and cheered by thousands, but we know that somewhere underneath that barely moving exterior was a heart that may have been longing to be somewhere else just then, next to a hospital bed not very far away, or a tummy that was restlessly moving with concern for the one who has been her partner in life for so long.

What do we see, what do we know of what goes on in the world around us, how do we read the world as history unfolds itself? What do we know, or how much do we fathom of what goes on in other people's hearts and minds? How do we read them?

Paul says that what we see around us, is not everything there is to see or to know. That underneath what we can see, the images of life projected around us, there is a deeper truth, hiding beneath the surface. That where we may see one thing, God may be seeing something completely different. A reality that only the eyes of faith can catch glimpses of or guess at, or trust is there.

We may see affliction, or wasting away, while what is actually happening is preparing glory, is tearing down a tent that is transient and perishable and replacing it with something far more solid. Jesus' family could not see the reality of the Spirit that possessed him. They mistook it for something different, something more sinister. They thought he was mad, lost his marbles, needed to be restrained for his own safety and that of others. Apparently the outward appearance of Jesus' ministry was not one that clearly communicated sense and sensibility. On the contrary. It looked disturbed, and was disturbing.

What do we see? Is what we see, what is in front of our eyes, God's reality, or, would we, if we looked with the eyes of faith, see something else, something more inspiring and inspired, something far more resilient and living than what is on the surface? The Church is a bit like Buckingham Palace isn't it? A symbol that stands for something that many may feel and value as being of eternal value and importance. Something showing all sorts of outer manifestations of time on the outside, but solid and unchangeable on the inside. Perhaps that is not the real truth though. Perhaps even the Church as we know it is just a tent, erected for God's people and purposes, but still not that building from God, a house not made with hands. Perhaps the decay, the decline, the emptying pews is just what we see on the surface. Perhaps, if we looked with the eyes of faith we would see other things, more important things, exciting and to a degree disturbing things. People dreaming dreams, stitching love and hope into the fabric of the world, using their skills to make things to speak of God and his presence in their lives. People like you and me, who are prepared to walk not by sight, but by faith, trusting that even where we can't see or understand where God is leading us, are prepared to trust God is leading us, present with us, building God's reality among us. I take great comfort from the gospel passage we read today. If Jesus' family thought he was crazy enough for them to want to restrain him, then there is hope for you and me gathering in this building on a Sunday morning with nothing to go on but a promise, a dream, a faith that will make us do things that may seem too small to be making any impact on what can be seen to be happening in the world around us. Trusting they will make a difference none the less. A few stitches, a bit of woodwork, 1300 words, a prayer, some singing, some hospital visiting, some looking after the neighbour, some Sunshine mission and Good grub support, some money to charity, some...

Well, all of these things, going into the building of a building from God. More solid than a tent, more imperishable than the bricks and mortar we tend to treasure so much as visible signs of our presence in the world. The eternal underneath the visible working its way forward into a future invisibly, working on something beyond our imagination or control. God building what is of eternal value through his Spirit, showing fleeting glimpses of something much bigger and deeper than the eye can see to those who are prepared to look with the eyes of faith and see past what may seem illogical, irrational and inconsequential, even mad, to those who will only see the surface. Amen.