

Sermon on 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (10th September, 2017)

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Sherlock Holmes once remarked about a man whom he and Dr Watson had met for the first time: "Beyond the obvious facts that he has at some time done manual labour, that he takes snuff, that he is a Freemason, that he has been in China, and that he has done a considerable amount of writing lately, I can deduce nothing else."

Sherlock Holmes is well-known for his method, which is founded upon his extraordinary power of observation. It appears that he possessed the amazing ability to size up a person with a single glance. If we think about it, our faith does leave signs and marks on us that make it possible for others to know us for who and what we are. Let us look at the signs and marks of God's grace that are so obvious, that it would not require a Holmes to read them.

Let us begin with the account of the first Passover, when the story of how the God of Israel led his people out of Egypt reached its climax. At midnight, the Lord of Israel passed through the land of Egypt and struck down all the firstborn, from those in the royal household to the humblest, and included even the firstborn of all the livestock. It was a heavy blow dealt to the false gods of the land, as none under their protection managed to escape. After hundreds of years of back-breaking slavery and increasingly cruel treatments from their Egyptian masters, Israel's deliverance had come at last! God was acting on their behalf! For them, the Lord was "passing through" in judgment and "passing over" in mercy.

Some have described the Passover as a kind of Jewish Thanksgiving Day, on which people feast on lamb instead of turkey. However, the important bit is not what they ate, but rather, what they did with the blood of the slaughtered lamb on that first Passover. That night, they took some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses. And the marks of blood became for them a sign of deliverance, a sign of grace, as the Lord passed them over and they were spared the plague of destruction.

For the people of Israel, the Passover carries great significance: On this day, the Lord brought them out from Egypt with a strong hand. The people of Israel are no longer slaves! They are free! The time had come for them to build themselves into a nation and establish their identity as a people. The Passover was the turning point. Henceforth, the month has been for them the first month of the year. It marks not only the beginning of a new year, but the end of slavery and the beginning of a new identity and new found freedom.

It is easy to associate signs and marks with tattoos. For the Maori, tattooing has a long history. In fact, ta moko, the traditional Maori facial tattoo, is like a history of the wearer's achievements and tribal affiliation, as well as a symbol of rank, social status, power and prestige. However, it is a very different story in Asian culture. In ancient China, for example,

facial tattoos were used as a form of criminal punishment meant to cause the wearer to lose face both physically and metaphorically. Confucianism, an ideology which has deep roots in traditional Chinese culture, regards any damages or changes made to one's body, including tattooing, as disrespectful towards one's parents. Since Confucius advocated honouring one's parents as one of the major virtues, tattoos were considered socially unacceptable, at least until recent years.

With the passage of time, the significance of tattooing has changed. Nowadays, tattooing has become, for some, a fashion statement. Similarly, despite its origin as a symbol of shame and humiliation in Jesus' time, the cross shape has since become a popular choice by many jewellery designers. While it is cherished and treasured by many Christians as a symbol of their faith, cross-shaped jewellery is also worn by people who hold other or no religious affiliations.

Whether we wear cross-shaped jewellery or not, we do carry signs that mark us out as belonging to God. One of these signs that all baptised Christians share is the cross put on our foreheads when we were baptised. At baptisms, the congregation sings,

You have put on Christ,
In Christ you have been baptized.

The concept of putting on Christ has its roots in the Passover. For the Israelites, the Passover is kept as a commemorative and sacramental ordinance of perpetual obligation. By the Christian, it is spiritually observed, its full significance recognized and all that it foreshadowed realized in the sacrament of Holy Communion. That is why whenever we gather for the Eucharist, we use Paul's words to remind us how Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, which is the Passover of the new covenant (see 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; *A New Zealand Prayer Book*, pp.422, 437, 469, 487, 513). Jesus was the Pascal lamb offered on the altar. God was crucified to free believers from the bondage of sin. Just like the blood of the lamb was shed in the first Passover, Jesus' blood was shed. Just like the Israelites were freed from slavery in Egypt, God calls his own people out of darkness into his marvellous light (1 Peter 2:9).

Although the people of Paul's time were desperately searching for the meaning of life amidst a general decline of morality and values, the Apostle demanded no less from believers in keeping the commandments. In the passage of Romans we heard today, Paul urged believers to keep the law through putting into practice its essence, which is love. He said, "...for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law" (Romans 13:8b), and further emphasised that "Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law" (Romans 13:10).

What then are the marks and signs that distinguish the people of God?

Firstly, put on Christ by following in the footsteps of Jesus. If we commit ourselves to Christ by faith and square up to our temptations in his strength, then we are wrapping ourselves in him, and he will be to us our armour, strength and righteousness. Secondly, put the law into practice by loving one another. Love is not only the avoidance of injuries, but seeking to do others good. In doing so, it would prompt to justice, truth and benevolence, thus satisfying all the demands of the law. And these are signs of God's grace that have marked us out as His children, His beloved. The Holy Communion is the new Passover. Whenever we gather at the Lord's Table, we are reminded of God's love for us, we experience anew God's love, and our strength is renewed so that we can love others. Yes, it is only by God's love that we are enabled to love our neighbours. And this love marks us out as God's own.

Allow me to finish with another Sherlock Holmes story:

Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson were on a camping trip. In the middle of the night Holmes woke up and gave Dr Watson a nudge. "Watson" he said, "look up in the sky and tell me what you see." "I see millions of stars, Holmes," said Watson. "And what do you conclude from that, Watson?"

Watson thought for a moment and said, "Well, astronomically, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Astrologically, I observe that Saturn is in Leo. Horologically, I deduce that the time is approximately a quarter past three. Meteorologically, I suspect that we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. Theologically, I see that God is all-powerful, and we are small and insignificant. Uh, what does it tell you, Holmes?" At that point, Holmes snapped, "Watson, you idiot! Our wide view of the sky above us tells me that someone has stolen our tent!"

Indeed, the signs and marks of the grace that God has bestowed on us are that obvious. No astronomical, astrological, horological, meteorological, or theological training or knowledge are required for others to discern that we are followers of Christ, that we are marked with God's signs of grace. May we live in God's love, and in our daily living, let His love shine through, so that these marks and signs of His grace can become our testimony of Him to the world. Amen.