

Family service talk 25 June 2017 (Matt 10.34-39)

How many hairs are there on the average human head do you think? It turns out that we all have roughly 100,000 hair follicles on our heads, that can grow around 20 new hairs each over our lifetimes. Apparently, blondes have more hair strands – about 150,000. Brunettes and black-haired folk are around the 100-110,000 average, and redheads – sorry my family – average around 90,000.

...But anyway, that's a lot of hair.

Jesus uses the idea that 'the hairs on our head are all counted' to say something about how closely God is paying attention to us. That's another way of saying – God knows something about you that you could only get to know by being really close, and taking a long and patient time to find out.

He also talks about sparrows – sold two for a penny. That means, for the people of Jesus' day, sparrows weren't worth much. They were common, and unimportant. Yet even sparrows, Jesus says, are being watched 24/7 by a loving God. The moment a sparrow falls, God knows it. If that's true for sparrows, Jesus says, isn't it more true for each unique human person, made in God's image?

Jesus' teaching was completely radical for his disciples. They had been taught about God as someone far off and scary. This God was kept busy with big, important things, but probably didn't have much time for individuals. But Jesus talked about God as his Father. And he used images like counting the hairs on your head and watching the sparrow to say that this Father God is always there, always paying attention, always ready to notice our needs and care for us.

How can this be? we might ask. How can God see me, and care for me, at the same time as billions of other people on this planet – let alone the sparrows, and all the other creatures. Surely, there have to be moments when God's attention is busy elsewhere? The mistake we make when we think like this is to think of God as just a really big version of our human parents – or in fact any person at all. Because we know that we humans can really only pay attention to one, maybe two things at a time. We've all heard 'not now, I'm busy' from a parent, or 'wait, your sister is talking. I'll listen to you in a moment'.

If we start thinking about God as just a large version of that, we'd have every reason to doubt Jesus' teaching. Maybe God, being bigger, could do, say, 100 things at once, but probably I'll miss out quite a lot of the time.

But God isn't a really big human. God's way of seeing, and God's way of being are completely different from ours. God doesn't just see everything at once, God is everywhere at once. Like the light in this room that's completely surrounding us and everything at the same time. We are like a tiny lamp that puts out a small circle of light – you can see its

edges. But God is like the sun – the light gets in everywhere. Or God is like the air that we're breathing all around us, compared to a small tank of oxygen that's contained in one place.

Another way that we might worry about God being too much like a human parent is to think that if God is looking everywhere at once, then it's because God wants to catch us being naughty. Jesus' teaching about God being our Father isn't meant to say 'be good because God is always watching!' God's watching is a tender, heart-filled watching. God doesn't need anything from us, and so even though God longs for us to grow into kind and courageous people, God is able to be completely patient and loving when we fail – unlike our human parents, who are, well, human, and make mistakes themselves. The everywhere-ness of God's seeing, is the everywhere-ness of God's love.

So, says Jesus, do not be afraid; for you are of more value than many sparrows. You might not think that you're very important, or interesting, or special. But if a sparrow doesn't fall to the ground without God noticing, how much more will God notice and care about the things that happen to you. You. Not your more talented brother, or your super saintly sister. You.

Does this mean that we're all promised a nice and lovely life, where nothing goes wrong, and where God stops bad things from happening? Nope. In our gospel reading today, Jesus was teaching his friends about what to expect from being his followers:

- people will say bad things about you – they called Jesus a demon or devil
- people might even hurt or kill your body
- we will feel like pretending we don't know Jesus to keep ourselves safe
- sometimes the people who will try to stop you from following Jesus will be members of your own family, and that could get nasty
- following Jesus is costly. It can feel like giving up everything

Now, we live in different times from Jesus, and in a safe country where people don't kill each other because of their religion. So you're really not at risk from some of these things. And if you're a child here in church today that's probably because the grown-ups in your family want you to be here and aren't trying to stop you.

But even so, there are plenty of moments in our lives with Jesus when it will feel like it would be easier if we weren't a Christian. There will be people who think you're a bit weird, possibly even stupid for being part of the church. Some members of your family might really struggle with your faith decisions, and it can be hard to go against them to do what you feel is God's call. Often the decisions we make in following God's guidance mean that we end up with less money, less security, less mana in the world, and more sorrow and struggle as we share in the sufferings of the people God loves.

Jesus knows all that. And that's why he says 'yes, it's hard. But don't be afraid. Because you are so, so, special. So important to God. So loved. Whatever happens to you, God will be there, giving you what you need, restoring your soul and leading you in ways that will bring

you joy. There will still be real celebration even on the hardest road. And remember this life isn't the whole story. There is another chapter that opens even after the worst has happened.'

'Those who lose their life for my sake will find it,' says Jesus. When we can trust that we are deeply loved and seen by God, then we have the strength we need to let go of our tight hold on what we want. We can let go our hold on our need for safety, or having people think well of us or say good things about us. We can make choices that could be risky. And then, we can receive what God wants to give us. And what God wants to give us is God's own life. Let us open our hands to receive.