

# I don't recognise that number

Mark 12:28-34

Rev J Shannon

This is a true story<sup>1</sup>

Last week a hiker that was lost in the Colorado mountains. He/she didn't return to their car before nightfall which triggered a park rescue system. It took the hiker 24 hours to find a trail head that lead them back to their car. In the meantime, search and rescue were out in full force. During the search, they kept ringing the hiker's phone but s/he didn't answer...because it was an unknown number. True!

People don't pick up the phone if we don't know who's calling?<sup>2</sup>

We are all familiar with this week's reading. We've said and sung it (not lately) so many times that it's almost joined Gladly the cross-eyed bear in the book of pat phrases. If you say something often enough – 'it loses it salt'. You have heard countless ministers discuss 'who is my neighbour' and 'love thy self.' But I wonder how many of them discussed the first line? God.

We might take a moment to think about who's calling? Who are we talking about?

But first, I want to share with you a couple of experiences over this week.

We had/or didn't have, the Ministers retreat on Monday and Tuesday. I mean the real retreat at Galong was cancelled weeks ago – so my calendar duly filled the space. Then at the last minute, we were told it would be on-line in 4 zoom sessions. Now I was devastated that the retreat had been cancelled which may explain why I so solidly filled that space. Monday is my day off, I had plans and I resented giving that up and Tuesday, I galloped (on zoom) from meeting to retreat to meeting to retreat session. Altogether there were about 6 hours on zoom. Do you know how hard it is to settle down and be spiritual in front of a camera when your mind is racing to the next meeting?? And in which chat room do I room for God?

There were about 39 people in the 'retreat' – from all over the State. Some were lay leaders, or pastors some ministers including Ministers of the word,

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<sup>1</sup> Not 'once upon a time' like Job

<sup>2</sup> It's true for my family! My overseas number comes up as 'out of area' so they don't answer because they think I am a spam caller from Mumbai

chaplains and Deacons. I kept winding up in Bible study break-out rooms with chaplains<sup>3</sup> and *one* thing was glaringly apparent – we *sure* see scripture differently from the rest of the world!

I have a bit of a spiritual pen-pal in Braidwood. We don't know each other very well but there is a real connection. Either it was a God moment or she noticed I was distracted because an email (or was it chat room?) popped up and said something like ...if we were in Galong, we would get a cuppa and sit under a tree...and she went on to ask...

"I wonder who *God* is for Jean? I'd be really interested to hear about that.

And then, without invitation, she went onto say...

For me today, *God* is an invitation, the first warm sunny day after a cold, dark winter, or the hint of a cool breeze after a hot, muggy day. An invitation into a new season, and a question of what needs to be divested, what needs to fall, and what will stand firm and solid. "

God wasn't the retreat topic, by the way.

I thought, 'wow!'. When was the last time *you* were asked about God? That put me on the spot.

Now here I have to go to a higher source to describe what that 'spot' felt like. Rachel Held Evans was young, intelligent and had a media profile so she would often get invited to conferences to speak about church and faith. She felt the least competent – and said telling Christians what she believed was like,

Approaching a microphone and attempting to explain the most important, complicated, beautiful and heart-wrenching relationship of my life in 30 minutes without yelling or crying or saying any cuss words....

You see where I'm at. Maybe that's the problem – we don't break ourselves open...I don't like bleeding in public ...and I never share those inner thoughts ...but I responded to Kathy<sup>4</sup> by email (note delayed response)

*Gosh! sitting under a tree having this conversation is exactly what I need! You got me thinking...*

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<sup>3</sup> It happened so often, we thought it was a conspiracy

<sup>4</sup> Not her real name but I am sharing this with her permission

I agree with the 'invitation' - I think that invitation is right but perhaps a little more tangible for me. You can *feel* a door opening somehow in the current. You can *feel* fresh air as it brushes against your cheek.

My God is ever present in the air within and around me and within others. A presence that while not an interventionist - makes it known to me that I am not alone. Passages like 'I knew you in the womb' speak to me. String theory like butterfly's wings creating change in the world makes sense to me.

But then, I have to ask myself - why are there times when I can't feel it?

What about you?

And she said,

Yes, I am loving this shady tree space too. Penny<sup>5</sup> (that was the retreat leader) asked the question yesterday "What are you thirsty for?" Funny how sometimes we don't realise just how thirsty we are until we start to sip.

Thanks for sitting with me and sharing the beautiful scene, What a view! Thirst quenching and refreshing. Your sentence, "My God is ever present in the air within and around me and within others." Resonated in my spirit like a bellbird in the bush.

And she went onto say....

I love treasure hunting - intentionally looking for the fingerprints of God in my moments, and for the treasure of the presence of God in the people I meet.

For me today there is an awareness of something hidden, deep within, unseen, that is strongly drawing me: *abide*.

I'm going to leave that conversation (and the imaginary scene) for a moment and come back to it. I want to talk about the 2<sup>nd</sup> thing on my mind this week.

A few weeks ago, Robbie Tulip asked me to write an article on the theology of chaplaincy. And I tried. I really struggled. I did the best I could but on reflection, (that is, after submitting the article) I realised what the problem was: – it is a counter-intuitive concept for me. There is no theology *of* chaplaincy – chaplaincy is theology *in* practice. It's the difference between a can of paint and painting.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> and more important point is ... I'm not a rat's rear-end of a theologian. I leave that to the academics. And in line with Rachel– I am the *worst* person to be putting across a 'party line'. Remember when I said chaplains **SEE** scripture differently – that means that our beliefs about God are drawn from a totally different, but the same, texts.

Theology is simply the philosophy or ideas about God – but traditionally, it is developed in received word – that is, what we read and what we were taught. Paul spent his life 'correcting' our thinking but he is one voice among many. And not to forget as we have discussed these last few weeks: wisdom is knowledge plus intuition plus *experience*. It's not about being told.

So if my friend Kathy asked you, 'Who is your God?' there would be about 36 different thought bubbles in this room today. Oh yes, we all believe in the one *true* God but who/how we perceive the Divine is probably unique to each of us. Loving God; Gracious God; Fearful God???

And there is no point dodging the question by saying 'Jesus'. Because deep down we know Jesus who threw over the tables in the temple; Jesus who wept for his friend; Jesus who rebuked his Disciples, 'you still don't understand and Jesus in doubt ' My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?'

I'm going to leave you for a minute to think about that. Who is God to you?  
'(pause for silence)

For those of you who opted for 'God is love' – I'll throw this challenge to you. My very wise friend in Canberra<sup>6</sup> told me, 'Justice is love in public'. Once again, you can see the difference between the paint can and the painting.

I started Chaplaincy theology article with...

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<sup>6</sup> Also a chaplain

From the moment Adam and Eve listened to God walking through the garden, Chaplains were born to walk in strange places and listen for God.

Which isn't quite true – because as far as I know, there were no chaplains in Eden at the time ...but what is true is that chaplains not only listen for God – they listen for *your* God. And they reflect *that* light back to the person in need. You.

We can't *know* God – I know that but we can crack open to a sense, a desire and an invitation. If your metaphorical phone rings with an unknown number – it would be wise to answer it!!!

And when we say 'love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul' – you'd better know who you're talking about.

Let us pray – Knock, knock, who's there. God.  
May I hear you.  
Amen.