

**Morningside Parish Church**  
**Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> July at 10.30am**  
**Rev Tom Gordon**

**“God is in this place”**

**Readings**

Genesis 28:10-19a, Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

**Text: Genesis 28: 16**

**“Surely the Lord is in this place, but I did not know it.”**

**“Harold”**

A story from *A Blessing to Follow* by Tom Gordon  
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*“Our Father, who art in heaven, Harold be thy name; thy kingdom come, thy will be done ...”*

*For as long as Sammy could recall, God was called Harold. After all, he’d say his prayers every Sunday and “Harold” was right there at the start. Other people called God Harold too when they all said their prayers together in church. He could hear them round about him – “Harold be thy name ...” So, as far as Sammy was concerned, God’s name was Harold. There was no doubt about it.*

*Sammy and Harold were good mates. And, for most of the time, Sammy and Harold got along just fine.*

*From time to time, though, Sammy would get to wondering what Harold was like. He knew he was really old – after all, he’d made the whole world, and a long, long time ago. And he knew he was big and strong – his songs in Sunday School told him that. And Harold was very, very loving.*

*So Sammy was extremely surprised when he heard his mum say that Harold was moving in next door. Harold? Next door? God, moving in to Number 7? Maybe he’d misheard. He knew that someone was moving in next door. He’d seen a massive furniture van pulling up outside when he was on his way to school. So could it be true like his mum said? Was God really moving in next door?*

*Sammy hovered about the kitchen to overhear his mum chatting with Mrs Valentine from Number 3. And it was right enough: “Harold and Janice,” his mum had said. Harold! HAROLD! Sammy couldn’t contain his excitement. He couldn’t wait to meet with God and see what he was really like. So, when he’d watched the big van drive away after tea-time, he decided to play round by the side of the house to see if he could catch a glimpse of God.*

Imagine his surprise when the front door of Number 7 opened and two people – not unlike his mum and dad or even Mrs Valentine from Number 3 – emerged carrying mugs of tea and sat down on the doorstep to survey the scene. “Perhaps Harold’s still inside and these are his body-guards,” Sammy thought. He wandered casually into the garden of Number 7.

“Hello,” he offered.

The two folk on the doorstep turned and smiled, “Hello,” they said in chorus.

“I’m Sammy. I live over there,” said Sammy, turning round and pointing firmly to his own front door.

“Hello, Sammy,” said the lady. “I’m Janice. Pleased to meet you.”

Sammy smiled, and looked over at the man. He smiled back. “I’m Harold,” he revealed.

Sammy was speechless. His mouth opened wider and wider. His eyes were like saucers. The couple on the doorstep looked at one another, obviously puzzled by the kid’s reaction. No one spoke for ages, as Sammy just stared and stared and stared.

“You OK?” Harold asked.

“Are you really God?” Sammy blurted out. Harold threw his head back and guffawed loudly.

Janice put her arm round his shoulder, “That’s classic!” she chortled. “This man? God? Now that’s really rich ...”

But Harold seemed to understand that there was something going on here that was more than just an inquisitive kid asking a silly question. He smiled sympathetically.

“What makes you ask that?” he enquired.

Sammy could barely raise his voice above a whisper. “Because God’s called Harold ... and you’re Harold ... and you’ve moved in next door ... and I wanted to know what God is like ... and so ...” He’d dried up. There was nothing more he could say.

His new neighbour beamed from ear to ear. “No, I’m not God,” he said. “I’m just another Harold.”

“Are you like God?” Sammy whispered.

“I suppose I am,” Harold replied, “just like you are, and just like Janice here. We’re all kind of like God, whether we’re called Harold, or Janice, or Sammy.”

That was enough for Sammy, and he turned slowly and headed back home. Harold and Janice smiled at one another. Janice shrugged her shoulders. “What was that all about?”

The next Sunday in church, Sammy got stuck at the beginning of his prayers.

“Our Father, who art in heaven, Harold be thy name ...”

“Our Father, who art in heaven, Janice be thy name ...” No, it just didn’t sound right.

“Our Father, who art in heaven, Sammy be thy name ...” Wow! That sounded very strange ... And there and then Sammy decided that he had a lot more thinking to do about God, and he and Harold were going to have a long, long chat very soon.

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When I was a Parish Minister – and that was twenty years ago now – I believed I was a salesman for God. A door-to-door salesman, if you like, meeting people with a cheery smile, carrying my suitcase with all the products I believed in – creeds, beliefs and tenets of my faith, explanations, Bible Stories and the like. I had tested all these products for myself. I knew that they worked. And, with a passion, I believed that if I sold them to other people, their lives would be the better for it. I wasn't a pushy salesman. I listened. I took my time. I was gentle and kind. I was sincere and honest. But I had my products to sell. I believed in my trade. There was nothing wrong with that. Ministry worked. People's lives *were* changed. I did a good job for the Church, for my God, and as a disciple of Jesus. I did what I was called upon to do.

And all of that was fine, and remains fine, apart from one thing, one fundamental flaw in my ministry ... I had God in my suitcase. I'd reduced God to what I could carry around, what I could show people, what I knew and understood. I had brought God down to size, to *my* size, to a manageable product. It was still a good God. It was a God who could affect people, change people and improve people. But it was a God of *my* definition, my shaping, my limiting, a God in my suitcase.

I don't know when that changed. But, during my time as a hospice chaplain, when my role was to "be with" rather than "sell to", I ditched the task of being God's Salesman ... Not because it wasn't a good job ... not because I wasn't good at it ... not because it wouldn't still make a difference to people's lives ... But because it made God too small. It trapped God in my suitcase. It limited God to what I could carry around, to what I could know, to what I could explain. It made God too small ...

And my time with people who were dying, my time listening to people's searching questions about the meaning of life, my time finding beauty in brokenness, healing in the face of death, wonder, power, majesty when there were no words ... my times seeing lives transformed, not people "getting religion", but being in touch with the nature of God, being loved, being forgiven, being made whole even as they died ... all of that made me realise that I'd my God too small, and that God would not be, would never be, confined by my limited faith, my limited beliefs, my limited understanding.

Look at Jacob. A rogue, a cheat, a charlatan ... a man my boss when I was a Probationer minister in Easterhouse in Glasgow described beautifully as a "bampot and a nyaff ..." This man falls asleep and has a dream, a dream of a ladder reaching up to heaven, a dream of angels running up and down the ladder, a dream of God coming to him and promising him an amazing future; a dream, a vision, a voice, a revelation of the nature of God ... And he awakens and he knows that this God whom he sought to define, or even to ignore, would

not be confined to his limited understanding, but would reveal himself in all his forgiving love ... And Jacob awakes to that revelation and says:

**“Surely the Lord is in this place, but I did not know it.”**

Look at our parable from Matthew’s Gospel. The seed is sown, right enough. The farmer works hard. He knows his stuff. The seed – like the products in a salesman’s case – is in his basket. So he sows and he believes ... And, blow me, do weeds not grow. The harvest isn’t perfect.

And yet, the harvest is not spoiled. The farmer has not failed. The patience of God is longer and deeper and wider than that of a distressed farmer. The wisdom of God was more than the immediate moment of apparent failure. The embrace of God is wider than just the *perfect* harvest.

And while the farmer looks at his weeds, and as he doubts his effectiveness, and as he despairs for his future, the Lord of the Harvest comes and says, “It’ll be OK ...” And, at that moment, might the farmer not say:

**“Surely the Lord is in this place, but I did not know it.”**

And what of Sammy? A funny story? Of course. But is God not seen and known through the eyes of a child? Is God not seen and known in the insights of new neighbours, even if they don’t understand what’s going on? Is God not seen and known in a simple faith, in a desire to have a long chat with Harold – whoever and wherever he might be? And might a child have realised this truth:

**“Surely the Lord is in this place, but I did not know it.”**

So where is your ladder that draws you upwards, that takes you from your limited understanding, or even your rejection of God, and offers you a glimpse of the glory of God which you did not expect to find? When will you say:

**“Surely the Lord is in this place, but I did not know it.”**

And where is your harvest, not the perfect one that you would like, but the messy one, the incomplete one, the disappointing one, the one that consumes you with failure? And where are the times when you look out over *that* harvest field of wheat and weeds all jumbled up together, and God taps you gently on the shoulder and reminds you: you just sow the seed ... I ask no more of you than that ... be faithful ... be diligent ... be patient ... know that I am God, the Lord of the Harvest? And in that moment of reassuring revelation, might you not say:

**“Surely the Lord is in this place, but I did not know it.”**

And what is your name for God? Is it Harold? Is it Janice? Is it Sammy? Does it matter? No, I don't think it does. For what matters is that you can say your prayers of an evening, or come to Church on a Sunday, or walk your dog on the Pentlands, or find comfort from a loving friend ... *Then*, you give a name to God. *Then* you have God's revelation. *Then* you know and believe. *Then* you have the whole of God, beyond your imagining. *Then* you have a God who is unconfined. And in that moment, when all is well, will you say with me:

**“Surely the Lord is in this place, but I did not know it.”**

Back in June of this year, I had a holiday with my wife and friends in the Outer Hebrides, on the Island of Lewis. On the Saturday when we were driving South through Harris to the Ferry terminal, we called on to a little Art Gallery, and there we met an artist called Willie Fulton. This little, 70-year-old Glasgow man gave us a welcome that was very special. He showed us his studio. He talked about some of the paintings he was working on. He shared thoughts about the changing light outside his studio window, overlooking the bay and the Minch. He moved us when talking about the beauty of creation, his own recent times in hospital for a triple bypass, for his love for his wife, for the value of the gift of more time he'd been given to capture beauty on his canvasses ... When he learned I was a minister, he immediately said: “I'm not a religious man myself ...”

But does this man not, every day, have a glimpse of God, a ladder to heaven, a harvest to appreciate, a name for the divine? Did this man, in the beauty of his painting and his appreciation of life and love not give *me* a new ladder to God, a new understanding of the nature of our world, another new name for my God? Did this man – Willie Fulton, Glasgow artist, hospitable host, beautiful painter – not cause me to say:

**“Surely the Lord is in this place, but I did not know it.”**

So here is your task today and every day ... find a new ladder to heaven; find a new understanding of the harvest; find a new name for God; don't confine God to any suitcase, to any limited understanding; don't make your God too small. Be a Jacob ... Be a sower ... Be a Sammy ... Be a Willie Fulton ... and say with me – with rejoicing:

**“Surely the Lord is in this place, but I did not know it.”**