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# Yesterday, Today, and Forever

Hebrews 13:8

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on August 29, 2010 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

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Who *are* you? This is a question we only get to ask one another in the movies. The convention is for the question to be addressed by a woman to a handsome man just as she's beginning to realize he isn't the uncomplicated body-and-soulmate he first seemed to be. Here's one typical scenario: the war is starting to go badly; the chief of the special unit takes a key officer aside, and sends him on a dangerous mission to infiltrate the enemy forces. This being Hollywood, the officer falls in love with a beautiful woman while in enemy territory. In a moment of passion and mystery, it dawns on her that he's not like the local men. So her bewitched but mistrusting eyes stare into his, and she says, "Who *are* you?"

Then there's the science fiction version. In this case the man develops an annoying habit of suddenly, without warning, traveling in time, or turning into a caped superhero. Meanwhile the woman, though drawn to his awesome good looks and sympathetic to his commendable desire to save the universe, yet finds herself taking his unexpected and unusual absences rather personally. So on one of the few occasions she gets to look into his eyes when they're not undergoing some kind of chemical transformation, she says, with the now-familiar, bewitched-but-mistrusting expression, "Who *are* you?"

"Who *are* you?" We never ask one another this question for fear of sounding melodramatic, like we're in a movie. But the first week of being at college sure is the time when we're dying to ask it. We're desperate to find out who everyone else really is. But one troublesome thing holds us back: we're actually not altogether sure who we are ourselves. We're not sure if, like the character from the first movie, we don't belong here, because we're a fraud, or, like the character from the second movie, no one will ever deep down really understand us, because we're an alien. We can't ask someone "Who *are* you?" in case they ask us the same question back, and stumble on our carefully-concealed secret.

This is the emotional landscape we cross a thousand times in our first week at college. Who am I? Do I dare ask anyone else who they really are? Am I who I was until a week ago, the person called *yesterday* – the person with a crazy father and a doting puppy and a desperately boring hometown? And how much of the truth about yesterday am I ready to tell? Or am I the person called *today*, with an identity as new as the set of clothes I just bought last weekend? How can I take in all that there is to assimilate *today*, how real *is* it, and how much do I let it change who I think I am? And is there a *forever*? Are there any things that are *always* true? Is there anything in *me* that will always be true? Are there any people who really tell the truth?

Yesterday. Today. Forever. These pretty much cover the big questions we have about ourselves and one another. These questions are focused like never before in our first week of college. And what all these questions have in common is this. "Who, or what, can I really trust?" Trust is one of the most precious things in life. But it's also among the most elusive. Are you a person who knows what it means for your trust in yourself or in someone else to disintegrate? If so, you'll be aware how hard it is to rebuild trust once it's gone. But you'll also realize that nothing of value or duration in life can exist without trust, hard as it may be to restore it out of the ruins of fragility or betrayal.

Where to find a thing or a person we can truly, finally, unreservedly trust? Hebrews chapter 13 gives us the bad news before it reveals the good news. The church is fragile: leaders change, it says; marriages sometimes fail; money can be short; disciples face torture and prison; and people teach all sorts of bizarre and sometimes damaging doctrines. Everything is transient and flawed. There's no sentimentality here. But the good news is that there's a place to center our trust, a truth to end our striving for truth. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever."

Why, if trust is so vital and precious, is it yet so hard to trust? Think about the difference between these two sentences. "I thought I knew you." "Why can't you just grow up?" When you say to someone, "I thought I knew you," you're painfully realizing that nothing in life stands still. Everything is either growing, or decaying, all the time. That makes it hard to trust – because you don't know what this thing or person will be in a day, a week, or a year's time. But when you say, "Why can't you just grow up?" you're putting your finger on the opposite problem. Some people or things can't or won't change, even when you want or need them to. We, ourselves, change, and our wants and needs change with us, and we naturally want things and people to change to suit our needs.

Hebrews is saying we can trust Jesus. We can trust Jesus, because he changes to accompany us at every step, but nonetheless remains forever the same. We long for unchanging, rooted, things we can trust eternally, forever; but we also need things that change in time, accompanying us at every point. What Hebrews is saying is, Jesus is *both* of these things. Jesus is eternally trustworthy forever. But Jesus is also a being in time, who meets us in our laughter and joy, because in his resurrection he knew laughter and joy, and meets us in our grief and fear, because in Gethsemane he knew grief and fear. There's nowhere we can go that Jesus can't meet us, and nothing we can feel in which Jesus can't come close to us. To say, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever," is to say the Jesus of Galilee, the Jesus to whom I say my prayers, and the Jesus I shall see face to face on the last day, are all the same person, and are a person I can trust like no other being. Unlike every other being, Jesus changes as we need him to change, yet remains the same yesterday, today and forever.

How can this be? How can Jesus change yet be the same? The answer lies in that central word, "Today." Today is the intersection of yesterday and tomorrow, of past and future. But today is more than that. The apparently fleeting moment of now is the precise point where the God of eternity meets the reality of lived time. We're talking about the intersection of time and eternity, the crossover of now and forever, the meeting place of the present and the permanent. Christians have a word for that intersection. D'you know what that word is? That word is Jesus. Jesus is what eternity looks like in time. Jesus is what living, tangible, existence looks like in eternity. Jesus is the vision of God, in both directions: Jesus is the lens through which *we see God*, and the lens through which *God sees us*.

Let me take you back for a moment to the first time as a child you lay down in a grassy field, and looked far and deep into the wide blue sky, and pondered what lies beyond every beyond. And let me take you back a very short time to this very morning, when you woke up from a deep sleep, and couldn't make any sense of time. Maybe you've felt once, or frequently, or maybe even right now, that there's no meaning or point in life, because our lives are tiny specks in the limitless universe, and mere blips in the ocean of eternity. Well, here's the good news. Jesus is God's answer to that bewilderment and despair. The Jesus of yesterday is a speck and a blip, like us, in one place and at one time. And yet the Jesus of forever is always and everywhere. The place and time where yesterday and forever, time and eternity, meet is *in Jesus today*.

And this is made most visible when Jesus dies on the cross. The agony of the cross is what happens when the unfathomable love of God meets the inexplicable sin of humankind. But think of it this way as well. Think of the cross as the intersection between time and eternity. The cross is what comes about *when the eternal changelessness of God meets the timebound fragility of humankind*. The cross is the place where Jesus is crushed between God's forever and our today. This is the moment when we discover once and for all who we are, and what we're capable of, and who God is, and what God's heart is made of.

And that's what God's heart *always* will be made of. That's where we suddenly, joyfully, cross over from time into eternity. To say Jesus is forever means in the end, when time runs out and all desires are known and all secrets are unravelled and every story is completed, we'll all come face to face with Jesus. And the Jesus we see will be the same Jesus that hung out in Galilee and meets us today. The Jesus that becomes all in all will be the same Jesus who said 'Blessed are the peacemakers' and who walked with us when our grandmother died. The Jesus that never ends will be the same Jesus who wept with Mary and Martha, was thirsty on the cross,

and lamented over Jerusalem. That Jesus stays close to us forever. Only God is forever, and God has chosen, in Jesus, to be with us.

Forever could have been mindless emptiness, forever could have been a tunnel of light, forever could have been echoing horror and relentless hurt and aching isolation. But it isn't. *Forever is with Jesus*. That's the gospel. In time, Jesus changed into whatever agonizing shape he could to show us how much God wanted to be with us and cherish us and restore us. In eternity, God changes *us* into whatever shape we need to be to live in the company of the Holy Trinity forever.

Who *are* you? We don't ask each other that question, for fear that someone will laugh with embarrassment. Then we ask another question, like 'What's the meaning of life?' Then we laugh again, because it's obviously a silly question. *But it isn't a silly question*. In fact, we'll never answer the first question until we answer this second one. And we've been given the answer. Jesus is the meaning of God made visible in space and time. And Jesus is the meaning of life made visible before God. The meaning of life is where the intensity and passion and joy and energy of existence meet the endlessness and boundlessness of eternity. Poised at that intersection of place and time is Jesus, the same now as always, the same here as everywhere. That always-and-everywhere God has chosen, astonishingly, to be close to us – specks in space and blips in time. Jesus is the name of the way God is close to us yesterday today and forever, in time and eternity. If we want our lives to have meaning, in the fleeting intensity of now and the fathomless extent of eternity; if we want to find out who we are, afraid as we may be to ask; if we want to know who or what we can trust, in a world of change and fragility; the gospel gives us one answer: we need to stay as close as we can to Jesus.

How do we do that? Well, look at the Jesus of yesterday. If we see Jesus spending time with a small, accountable community of disciples yesterday, maybe we should think about doing the same today, because maybe that's the kind of place God hangs out forever. If we see Jesus living his life in and among the poor yesterday, maybe we should think about doing the same today, because maybe that's the kind of place God hangs out forever. If we see Jesus facing hostility for taking the authorities to task yesterday, maybe we should think about doing the same today, because maybe that's the kind of place God hangs out forever.

Yesterday is never just yesterday with Jesus. Yesterday is full of the words and deeds that transform today, and anticipate forever. And today is never just another day with Jesus. Today is where yesterday meets forever. Today is where time meets eternity.

And forever? Forever is a door that Jesus opens into the heart of God. If you want to walk through this door, if you want to find out who you really are, if you want to cross over from time to eternity, stay close to Jesus. Forever. Forever. Forever.