

Sermon Archive 136

Sunday 12 February 2017

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Matthew 5: 21-26

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



The mornings have been crisp lately, so I've had to think about how many layers I'll wear. I decided to wear the extra layer. I can always take it off again if it warms up later. It's good to be prepared – and even better to avoid being cold! Cold in summer! Who'd have thought it!

Breakfast's all done and dusted, the dishes put away in the dishwasher. Now the car's pointed in the right direction, with its usual plume of carbon emissions trailing out behind it. Off to church I go!

It's a nice church. As I come in through its big ceremonial doors, I feel a sense of privilege. I'm aware this morning of a congregation in Rotorua whose big front doors are now charred lintels, falling, toppling, smouldering. Did you hear that the fire was suspicious? The media say that "young people" were seen running from the scene. I wonder what's gone wrong there. You'd need to be really angry to burn down a church. There's got to have been something more than meets the eye in Rotorua – some kind of unresolved matter – a resentment, a hurt, a settling of some kind of score. Thank God, that's not something **we** need to worry about.

Well the music's been played, the greeting's been given. We've sung the opening hymn – a well chosen thing with words about laying truth and love on the shrine. Not that we have a shrine. I guess "communion table" wouldn't scan – or rhyme with "thine"! Ha! Anyway, now we're praying our opening prayer. I've thought about the opening prayer a lot over the years. At the times in my life when I've believed passionately in the existence of the kind of God you can talk to, it's been good to say hello - with my thoughts, my silence, my heart, my being. And in those times when I've **not** believed passionately in a God you can talk to, parts of the prayer have felt like good therapy anyway – especially the parts about confession. It's been good to have some structured moment in the week to consider all the stuff I've tried

to do, but *haven't* done, and all the things I've tried not to do, but *have* done. It's good for the human being to re-visit its week – to peer into the arena of the conscience. (Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy.) If the alternative is just crashing through life without any self-reflection, then praying's not a bad option. I find the prayer leaves me feeling well. I feel like I've named something, released something, found something – that's made me "well" – perhaps less encumbered. When he, up the front, uses words like "forgiven", "free", "thanks be to God" – there's a kind of catharsis. And as I say, whether that's because God has heard me, or whether I've just expunged something myself from myself, I like the prayer.

Oooo. That's strange. Ow! That can't be good. Oooo.

On a Sunday morning, during the prayers of confession, I gave up my spirit. Some people were shocked. Others cried, as flights of angels winged me through the heavens - unto the throne of grace. The throne must certainly have been a throne of *grace*! You should have seen who was there. O, Judith! You're here! I'm glad you're here – I've thought about you off and on, over the years. And I've felt bad about how we parted. See, the trouble was that you kind of suffocated me, and when I tried to put a little distance between us, you panicked and came even closer. I didn't have the emotional maturity in those days. Nor did I really understand my own panic at the approach of a woman. I was scarce half made up. So all I could do was shout at you to go away. I know I hurt you. That's why, even though this is a bit awkward – (are we *allowed* to be awkward in heaven?) – I'm pleased you're here. You'll be interested to hear that you did sit in my prayers for a while. Not at the start. I was still angry and panicked – no emotional capacity for you in my confessions. But later, as I kind of realised what I'd done – how you were powerless to react in any way other than you'd done – that's when I entered you into my prayers of apology. I feel a bit silly saying it now, that I never knew whether I was talking to God or doing therapy! But I did think about you, and I talked about you, to God.

Judith smiles at me – with the kind of smile I suspect comes from being a citizen of heaven. She says to me "it's good that you talked to God, my friend. Did you ever think of talking to me?"

I don't argue with her. Given our current location around the throne of grace, it seems to me that argument would be out of place. And anyway, I know she's said something true. I've talked to others, I've talked to myself, I've talked to God; I didn't talk to *her*. In heavenly embarrassment, I offer to give her a hug – and she allows me. This hug feels better than all the churchly “assurances of pardon” I've ever heard. I never felt like this on earth – but maybe I could have . . . “Leave your offering; seek out your sister” he says.

Did I mention that the throne of grace was a throne of **GRACE**. I can tell you that it must *really* be a throne of grace! Because *he's* here. Again, I'm too new to the throne room to know what should happen now. I'm sure there must be protocols for when you're face to face with someone like him. Has he sneaked in the back? Got himself a shonky visa? Maybe he's got temporary sanctuary until the authorities arrive and ship him off to where he should be. Bastard! For my hope, his cynicism. For my giving, his taking. For my trust, his lying. For my vulnerability, his disregard. So he can get stuffed. What stupid grace forgives that? What priest of God pronounces assurance of pardon on that! What cheap grace has the cheek to declare done and dusted that! This is *my* wound – I'll be the one to say when “done” is done.

The bastard tells me that I sat in his conscience for quite a long time. He tells me that he talked to his heart about it. He thinks he might also have talked to God. Did he talk to his priest? – another human being? He didn't talk to *me* . . . Actually I didn't allow him to. And even here, in this place of grace, perhaps I'm still not going to let him. Maybe I'll just leave him to carry on talking to God. I turn away.

There are other people around the throne of grace. I don't think I know them – which is a huge relief actually. Interaction with strangers could bring some lighter, less complicated relief. The first stranger, however, says “this morning, when you put on that extra layer of clothes, I was cold”. The second stranger says “this morning, when you filled your dishwasher with breakfast dishes, my stomach was empty”. A third stranger turns out to be a penguin – whose home is melting as my car burns fossil fuel on its way to church. It doesn't speak to me - because it's

a penguin. A fourth stranger says “when you thought of that congregation up North having some kind of unresolved resentment or hurt, you said ‘Thank God that’s not something we need to worry about.’ Guess what? You **do** need to worry. In **your** community, in **every** community, there are legions of unresolved matters. Where there are rich and poor, companioned and lonely, satisfied and hungry, comfortable and cold, brothers and sisters have wads of things against one another. You acknowledge it every time you pray your opening prayers. You bring admission of it all to worship – and you put it on the altar. Yet today, Jesus says leave your offering there – leave it on the table of grace. Suspend your talking to God. Go and seek words with those with whom you have no peace.

-ooOoo-

Praise God for defibrillators! Zap, zap - I didn’t die! Thanks to expert intervention, I’m back in church. Those I’d frightened are scolding me. “Don’t you dare do that again”, they say. In a strange way the chastisement makes me feel loved. I wonder if all that stuff I saw was real. Was I really before the throne of grace? Or was that some deeply heavy therapy? God knows!

But here I am, back in the world, back saying my prayers – offering to God all that I’ve said, thought and done, and not said, thought or done. Here I am, revisiting the faces of those who hold things against me, and the faces of those I hold things against. Next week (God willing), maybe I’ll also be praying about those whose faces I **don’t** know – the ones who don’t share the food on my table or the clothes on my back – the people who don’t share the spoils I win through my unchallenged social position. And maybe, just maybe, some time before next Sunday’s prayers with God, I might have had one or two honest, healing conversations with one or two people – or maybe a penguin. (You talked to God. Did you talk to me?)

In some ways, praying is easy. Talking to people is hard. Jesus, this part of your gospel is a challenge. Teach me not just to pray to God, but to talk to other people.

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