

Sermon Archive 137

Sunday 19 February 2017

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Matthew 5: 38-48

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



The television journalist Andrew Denton is interviewing Bob Hawke, a one time Prime minister of Australia. The interview begins with some questions about Bob's formative years – how his parents influenced his development. Andrew asks Bob whether it's true that his parents had had a belief, from early on, that he would one day be Prime minister. Bob responded:

"O, I think that Mum seemed to have some view about it when I was born. She said there was something special. But that's a bit embarrassing to talk about."

Not wanting embarrassment to prevent Bob from commenting further, Andrew shifts the focus from the particular to the general. *"No, it's interesting, because it's about the power of the parent to shape the child. It wasn't just a vague belief, and it wasn't a boastful belief. There was just a sense of it in your family, wasn't there?"*

Bob goes on: *"Particularly with my mother, I think. Look, in our daily life it wasn't something that was talked about. It was just there, and the thing I owe so much to them is that they gave me everything I could have wanted – a totally loving environment – a sense of self confidence. I remember as a child they always encouraged me to express my point of view. None of this "seen and not heard" business. If I had a point of view, I was to express it. And they sacrificed everything to ensure that I had everything I needed in terms of education. So I couldn't have asked for anything more. **The power of the parent to shape the child is enormous.**"*

Bob gives an example of his father shaping his thinking. He says *"He was the most humble man, the most decent man I've ever met in my life. He always looked for the best in people – to find positives. And he said something to me that always remained with me. He said 'If you believe in the fatherhood of God, then you must necessarily believe in the brotherhood of man. It follows necessarily'. And even though I left the church and was not religious, that truth remained with me."*

The belief clearly did remain. At the time of the interview Bob was 78 years old.

Talking about his **mother's** influence, he describes her vociferously expressed belief in the value of education:

"My mother had a fanatical commitment to education. She was a teacher and she impressed upon me the importance of developing whatever talents I had; and it was pretty clear that I had been born with some. And she said 'don't just sit back and take it easy. Work! Develop what you've got.' She was not just a believer, but she drove me." [Andrew to Bob: "were you happy to be driven?" Bob:] "Not always. But she was persuasive!"

Later on in the interview Andrew raises the matter of Bob's having been awarded the amazingly prestigious Rhodes Scholarship. Responding, Bob declines to bathe in any academic glory. He notes, with a vaguely familiar forcefulness, that intelligence is just something you can be born with. You should be no more proud about having intelligence than anyone else should be proud of having curly hair or a nicely shaped nose. They're mere accidents of birth. It's what you **do** with your intelligence, says Bob, that matters.

Andrew says to Bob *"that's your mother talking there"*. Bob laughs. He says *"yes, yes it is"*.

The words that come out of our mouths. The noses on our faces. The value systems we carry within. The beliefs we reject and yet still hold. The things we stand for. The traits we admire. The power of the parent to shape the child.

I wonder what kind of parental shaping went on in the child who was Jesus. How did he become the person he became? Much credit would have to go to Mary and Joseph. Of course it would! But what kind of shaping are we talking about as we think of the **other** figure in Jesus' life – the One he sometimes referred to as "the Father"? For it was in search of, in obedience to, in partnership with that particular One, that he departed from his character-forming home in Nazareth. The great calling One (called "Father") drew him away from those other ones who were forming him. I'm wondering who he understood that irresistible, child-fashioning parent to be. I'm wondering how that parent's character presented itself to him as an influence. I'm wondering, as Jesus transitioned from being the ordinary son of Mary and Joseph, into the child of the "Father", what was driving that transition?

I wonder these things not because of any mere academic curiosity. I wonder them because Jesus told us that we too are to become children of God. The

nature of Jesus' God is also to be manifest in our nature. As **he** was being fashioned into the likeness of the Father, so **we** are being fashioned into godly likeness. Love your enemies, he says, **so that you may be children of your Father** in heaven. Be perfect, he says, **as perfect is your heavenly Father. Become** like God!

I suspect our usual reaction, when we hear Jesus calling us to become like God, is to panic. The call to resemble God is all tied up with things like "loving the enemy" and being "perfect". And these are things that seem either horribly smug or plain unattainable. Becoming like God is something we feel is doomed for failure. But don't forget: **enormous is the power of the parent to shape the child.** As the child becomes like the parent, much of it has to do with the parent. Perhaps Jesus became the magnificent character he became, not because of any great thing he did in his own strength, or on his own initiative, but because he opened his life up to the influence of a particularly enabling Parent. So again the question: where are we to find the influence of that enabling Parent?

Some centuries ago Thomas a Kempis wrote a book about people coming to resemble Jesus. He called it "The Imitation of Christ". It seemed to capture the human imagination, because it's reckoned to be the most widely read Christian devotional book following the Bible. It contains a whole lot of advice on shunning the world, turning away from noise and clutter. But for Thomas, the main technique for becoming Christ-like – for becoming like God – was the receiving of communion. And communion is not something so much that we do – an achievement that we attain. It is, instead, something we **receive**. It is something that is given to us. If we are fed, or if we are nurtured, if we are in any way grown, it is not because of anything we are **doing**. It is because of something that we are **given**. The Giver, the Blessor, the Nourisher. The One beneath whose self-sacrifice we live. (*They gave me everything I could possibly need.*) Not of our doing. Grace from beyond us. **Great is the power of the Parent to shape the child.**

I think that practical, sensible Presbyterians find this kind of thinking a challenge. We stand in a tradition that created things like the Protestant work ethic, the individual religious responsibility. Life - for us – have been things that we've worked at. Life has been about doing our duties – indeed as Mrs Hawke was wont to say, it's been about "putting into use the talents that we've been given". The worst thing we could do, is to sit there, doing nothing. Why would

religious life / spiritual life be any different? If Jesus calls us to become children of God, we're going to tend to hear it as a call to work – **disciplined, rigorous** work. Earnestly we must work at being like God. Dutifully we must turn our efforts to perfection. Each day, forty times before breakfast, we must with determination, regularity and structure, try to love our enemies, to be perfect, to turn the other cheek and walk the second mile. And each day, forty times before breakfast, our religious harvest will be the frustration of not being able to achieve it.

I wonder whether we aren't coming at faith from completely the wrong direction. If the power of the parent to shape the child is enormous, maybe rather than working and striving, perhaps we should be contemplating, adoring, "opening our selves to", enjoying. (Perhaps humanity's chief end really is to enjoy God - waiting for the nature to sink in. How's that for a Protestant pearl of great price?) Maybe, in our quest for Christ-likeness, we should be striving less, and meditating more (and more) on the love within which Jesus lived his life: *"My father was the most decent person I ever met. He gave me everything I could possibly need. I remember deeply and gratefully the nature of my Parent. And behold my parents' words begin coming out of my mouth. Behold, I can't shake from my mind the wisdom that came to my ears. Behold, now I am 78 years old, and feeling very much the child of the Parent."* Stop doing; stop striving; stop panicking. Instead begin remembering. Begin relating. Begin enjoying - and worshipping. Begin rejoicing that, almost unaware of any transition having commenced, you have begun to think like, to live like, to resemble, the Parent. Great is the power (and wonderful is the power) of the Parent to shape the child.

-ooOoo-

Andrew Denton is helping Bob Hawke think through how he has been influenced – turned into the person he is. It's an exercise of remembering with gratitude. Jesus calls us to resemble the One he calls "the Father". Less work; more grateful meditation. Less striving and panic; more grace and blessing. Great and wonderful is the power of the heavenly Parent to shape the child.

We keep a moment of quiet.

The Knox Church website is at: <http://www.knoxchurch.co.nz.html> . Sermons are to be found under News / Sermons.