

Sermon Archive 139

Sunday 5 March, 2017

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Matthew 4: 1-11

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Here's a three-stage parable about hunger and connectedness. Then we'll listen to the Bible. Then we'll share the bread, and go out into the world.

-ooOoo-

Once upon a time there was a man called Arthur. Arthur had one of those jobs that children dream of having. He was a maker of chocolate – creamy, sweet and silky. When Arthur's children were asked "what does your daddy do" they'd say with pride, "our daddy makes chocolate" – and all the other children would go "Ooooo". Arthur was good at making chocolate, and had been doing it for a really long time - so long, in fact, that he wondered whether he'd be able to do anything else. To bring a splash of reality to the story, it has to be said that Arthur's job wasn't quite as magical as it sounds. It was fairly straight-forward, not with a lot in it to stretch his creativity. He observed a machine in a factory. But for Arthur that was OK. It was regular work, among people he liked. At the end of each day it allowed him to go home with some money which he used to put food on the table for his children. Bread (not chocolate) in the stomach, a roof over the head, shape to the day. It's a living.

Once upon a time there was a tiger called Sendiri. Sendiri's job was to be a tiger on the island of Sumatra. Sumatra was a good island on which to be a tiger – plenty of jungle for him to patrol, with plenty of smaller animals in it for him to eat. If it was made of meat and moved even a wee bit slower than a tiger, then Sendiri would have it for breakfast. Over the many years of his family's evolution, Sendiri's kind had developed perfect capacities for the jungle. His camouflage was perfect. His size was suitably small for running quickly through the density of the trees. His whiskers had become so sensitive that he could feel where he was going – leaving his eyes totally free to focus solely on his prey. He was the perfect creature for that environment. He let out a roar of satisfaction!

Once upon a time there was a woman called Irene. Irene was clever. She'd studied psychology, Business Administration, and Marketing and Statistics, and graduated with a doctorate from Cornell University. Irene tends not to talk publically about herself – what she likes doing, what her home is like in Chicago. One thing she **does** say though, is that she has a high concern for the people who own shares in her business. Some are wealthy, but some also are simple Mum and Dad investors – people putting bread upon the table. So those people, as they get payment for their bread, are grateful to Irene.

Once upon a time, Sendiri felt a wee bit peckish. He'd woken up with a rumbly tummy. He didn't analyse it, because tigers don't analyse; but, on analysis, it must have been a bit longer this time since he'd eaten. So through the jungle he started stalking. Suddenly his whiskers and eyes sent him messages that didn't quite make sense. He seemed to have come to the edge of the jungle. He was sure he'd been here before and there was no "end of the jungle". There should have been more trees. But here's a wide open space.

Bright orange, stripy cats don't do so well in wide open spaces, so Sendiri's instinct was to not go forward. There he stands: not exactly frozen, but sort of stuck - hiding in the trees on the edge of the big cleared space. Getting hungry . . .

Sendiri's jungle has been cleared for the production of palm oil. There's a huge global demand for it. It goes into toiletries. It goes into processed food. It even goes into chocolate. Palm oil is one of the things used by Arthur to put bread on his table and feed his children. Arthur is part of what is killing Sendiri. There are only about three hundred Sendiris left.

Once upon a time Irene was looking at her spreadsheet. It was a nice day in Chicago. The spreadsheet was showing good returns for her Mum and Dad investors. Everything was going moderately well. But Irene didn't win a place on the Financial Times' list of the "Top 50 Women in Global Business" by being **moderately** successful. Thinking of the bread on her investors' tables, her imagination started playing with the idea of turning bread into caviar! O, it's just poetic expression! She's no desire to create a caviar culture. But she **has** just put something online, describing herself for her investors. She's said "Irene has changed the face, footprint and prospects of the company by reinvigorating iconic brands, transforming the portfolio into high-growth snacks categories, strengthening the company's presence in emerging markets and aggressively improving margins".

<http://www.mondelezinternational.com/about-us/our-management-team>

Aggressively improving margins . . . Was it for her own sense of success, or for the benefit of the Mums and Dads? God only knows! But to move from moderate to major success, Irene needed to move her production units closer to her larger consumer markets. A chocolate factory in Dunedin no longer made sense. Arthur lost his job. Did I mention that Arthur didn't quite know what he'd be able to do if he could no longer make chocolate? Well, now he's finding out. Perhaps he could go to Sumatra and plant some palm trees. There's quite a big market there . . .

A business woman in Chicago. A factory worker in Dunedin. A tiger in Sumatra. Mum and Dad investors all around the world – all trying to put bread on the table. Who would have thought they had anything to do with one another? Who would have thought that the invisible connections were so wide and so deeply significant? The interconnectedness of people and plights and plants – and being hungry, and seeking bread for the table . . .

Now I think we're ready to hear from the Bible.

Jesus has no bread on his table. He's hungry. And, in his hunger, he's tempted. He's tempted to turn stones into bread. It's a quick solution, which might make sense in the desert. But what would the choosing of that quick, easy solution *mean* for Jesus, as he takes it back into the world as a paradigm for how he's going to work?

In her article "Of stones and bread", Melissa Bane Sevier writes:

"I know", says Jesus, . . . "where bread comes from. It's a gift from God through the acts of nature, farmers and bakers. Any other process – especially one that only pretends to be miraculous – shortcuts the involved process that is part of what makes it 'gift' . . . It's the work that goes into the bread that makes it meaningful, and delicious enough to feed both body and soul. Bread takes time. Place seed in the ground. Wait for rain and sun. Weed and harvest. Thresh and preserve. Grind. Add ingredients. Knead. Bake. Serve. Enjoy. Take leftover seed and place in the ground. Repeat.

Shortcutting the process of satisfying human hunger (physical or spiritual) means the outcome can't be as meaningful or as effective. And of course, Jesus extends the metaphor by saying that we don't just live from bread, but

from every word that comes from God. That God-bread creates community around the table, feeds the hungry body and soul, and requires us to reach out to others.

That's what Melissa said.

What I say, is that Jesus quickly rejects the inclination to turn stones into bread. For him, that's not the Christ-like way. For him, he chooses to think of what is beyond the bread and stones – the gifts of God by which we truly live. Do we **live** by having immediate bread? Or do we **live** by sharing what we have? Do we **live** by loving one another? Do we **live** when we perceive life is a time-consuming, collaborative celebration of serving the “other” and finding the Word of God? Beyond the bread, something is emerging – expressing “God” – a Word coming “from the mouth of God.

We live in a world of hunger – where quite often, close to the hunger, is a beguiling quick and simple thing that could be done: the changing of an entry on a spreadsheet, the closing down of a distant factory, the stealing of a habitat for a toiletry ingredient. But these simple, miraculously quick solutions contribute **to** the hunger, rather than **solve** the hunger. The simple solutions make us **more** hungry – not **less** – until everything is deforested, every job is lost, every table is bare, every person is lonely in a desert. The miracle cure has been quick – but deadly.

Jesus calls us away from that. He calls us to consider how we are fed. Neither stone, nor bread. Neither miracle nor quick destructive solution – but something emerging from whom we understand our God to be, what it is we believe is being said by the One we saw in Jesus.

Around that is where Irene, Arthur and Sendiri will share life. That is where creation, if Christ arrives there from his temptations, will find the beginning of its healing. That is where the church will break and share its bread.

The tempter said “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” But he answered “It is written ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God’.”

Looking for the Word that leads us forward, we keep a moment of quiet.

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