

Sermon Archive 141

Sunday 19 March 2017

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: Isaiah 43: 18-21

Matthew 4: 18-22

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



This sermon was preached on the occasion of Knox beginning a series of mission discernment forums. For context and wider detail of the process ahead, go to the recent Mission Discernment edition of Knox Life:

http://www.knoxchurch.co.nz/data/knoxlife/201702210000_Knox%20Life%20-%20Mission%20Discernment%20Edition.pdf

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If it was some time in the sixth century before Christ, and you were a Jew, chances are you'd be looking for something new. A while back your big, high-functioning city had been brought to its knees – major parts of it left in ruins. Quite a lot of your people had been scattered; communities that should be together had been broken into splintered bits. There'd be a feeling of loss – and maybe, unprocessed yet, battling remnants of anger and resentment – things that the priests and experts hadn't yet managed to help the people divest themselves of. For those who had been carried off into exile, there'd be the confusion of now living in a culture, among a people, they didn't fully understand – everything is foreign, nothing easily fits, every situation is pregnant with social and cultural challenge. And for those who stayed at home among the physical ruins, the culture had changed too – into a culture of gloom. And I guess whether you're at home or away in exile, there'd be a sense, through having seen your life disassembled by forces beyond your control, that everything precious was totally fragile. The psycho-social landscape for a Jew, six centuries before Christ, was a complicated one on which to remain positive and healthy. Some people call it "survival mode".

Some time, mid-Sixth Century before Christ, a word is spoken to the survival people. "Forget about the former things", it says. "I'm about to do a new thing – see, now it's springing forth! Do you not perceive it?"

“A new thing?” perhaps the people reply. What is it? Where do we look? Part of us is ready for something new, and we don’t want to miss it. But if it’s springing forth, we’re not quite perceiving it! Can you give us a clue?”

The word continues. Look at the wildernesses – those stretches of emptiness where there’s no obvious direction to face, no obvious path to follow. Look to the places where there no “to” and no “from”. Yes there is an “up” and there is a “down”, but that’s hardly a help when you’re looking for a way to get out of there. Look to those wildernesses. If you notice a “way in the wilderness”, that’ll be my new thing. Someone knowing which way to face. Someone discovering a way forward. Someone having an idea, and other people saying “yes” with their feet. It’s springing forth! Do you not perceive it? Perhaps *it* is God’s new thing.

The word continues. “The wild animals will honour me, the jackals and the ostriches.” Neither jackal nor ostrich is your usual religious figure. Yes, we’re used to doves brooding over the water, and unblemished lambs on the altar. What doves and lambs “are and do” is often pressed into our great song of praise. But jackals and ostriches? Big, absurd flightless birds! Huge bulging eyes, gangly necks and bodies that look like pom poms on sticks. And jackals – clever, long-distance, dawn and dusk, opportunistic, dangerous! Maybe intelligence can honour God, but I’m not so sure that cunning can. Maybe power can honour God, but I’m not so sure about danger. How could jackals possibly honour the One who made them? Well, find out! Go looking! Go and see! And if you do, you might just be stumbling upon God’s new thing. Where the cunning ones, the dangerous ones, the weird ones, the irreligious ones demonstrate honour, perhaps we have a chance to perceive God’s new thing.

The word continues. “I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.” A people being formed. Community. Water in dry places. Knowing that we are chosen – whatever that means – something about knowing that our life is favoured, gifted, watered and nourished. Where people are ceasing to see life as a desert, and are beginning to see it as a “beautiful thing”, do we perhaps there see God’s new thing? So go out there. Go looking. Can you find people turning corners? Can you see lights shining in darkness? Can you see real

community where people find water together and life pours forth? Go looking for those things, and perceive, maybe, God's new thing.

That is the word spoken to the survival people. God's new thing is springing forth. It is! Do you not perceive it? If you don't, go looking! Because it's springing forth! Is it here (in this heart)? Is it here (among these people)? Is it out there, somewhere? It's springing forth! The challenge, for the survival people, is to perceive it.

I don't know that you'd describe Simon, who is called "Peter", and Andrew his brother, as "survival people". When we first see them they're just getting on with making a living. If you want to call that "surviving", that's OK. (It's hard to survive when you're not working!) Anyway, into their day comes someone called Jesus – a one-time carpenter from out of town. "Come, and follow me" he says. "I'll show you how to fish no longer for fish, but for people". Fishing for people? What for? How? What would "fishing for people" look like? I don't know! That's something new. So off they go to see.

As they went from there, he calls out to Zebedee's sons, James and John. They, too, leave what they're doing, to get on with exploring this new challenge – fishing for people. What does it mean? Where will it take them? Will it bring them any good? Nobody knows – they're not perceiving it. But off they go, the faith-full response, to go and see. We're told that Zebedee stays put in the boat. Whatever it was that Jesus said seemingly wasn't sufficient to dislodge *him* from his current form of fishing. I refuse to believe it's because he's of a certain age – a generation removed from his sons and Jesus. Older people also can be full of curiosity and adventurous thinking – and of courage before the partially perceived. Maybe Zebedee just really likes fishing – or has other sons at home who still need their father to bring home the fish. Or maybe, a sadder scenario, he's conservative and frightened, and his whole life has been a missed opportunity. Whatever the case, Zebedee shows that "coming and seeing", "looking for God's new thing" is not for everybody. Hopefully he'll pray for his sons, and for the man who called them, and for the discovery of God's new thing. Or, maybe more practically, he'll send his boys the odd basket of fish to keep them from hunger – hunger as they search out God's only partly-perceived, curiosity-awakening new thing.

“Don’t remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I’m about to do a new thing; now it springs forth! Do you not perceive it?”

The Christian story, that great Biblical arc of chapters and characters, is full of God addressing people. And quite often it’s all about flashes of lightning, great clouds of smoke. Quite often the God-spoken word makes things utterly clear about what God is doing or requiring. Don’t kill! Don’t steal! Leave Egypt right now! Leave that donkey in that ditch! Look at me on Saturdays! The story is of the work of God being done in the world – in obvious and easily identifiable ways. This morning, however, we have God saying “Yes, I **am** doing something in the world – but you’re going to have to search it out. It’s like a treasure hunt. God’s put this new “thing” out there somewhere – and called us to be wide-eyed, curious people of a search – maybe even, in keeping with the treasure hunt image, maybe even to take to the search with some joy or excitement. This morning, also, we have Jesus throwing out a metaphor and seeing whether the fishermen will catch it. What does it mean? Where will it take them? The enterprise of faith is leaving the things of old behind, and going off in search of something that (at the moment) is only just emerging - either partially perceived, or not perceived at all. The work of faith is talking to the jackals and ostriches. (“Have you seen the new thing?” they’re asked.) Faith is talking to the wilderness people about where we find the way. (Which way is up? Which way is out? Where’s the way that takes us to honour?) Faith is looking to the wide, open spaces - for signs of people discovering that life is a grace rather than a desert. Faith is leaving the boat to Zebedee, because we know God’s new thing (whatever it is) is somewhere else. Faith is about discovering, going out for a look, in the “sure and certain hope” that already, somewhere, a new work of God is waiting to emerge.

On the cusp of launching our mission discernment process, of exploring our next chapter, does the heart of Knox Church race a little? Leap a little? Feel “called” a little?

“Don’t remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth! Do you not perceive it?” “Come”, says Christ; “let’s go fishing, and finding God’s new thing!”

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