

Sermon Archive 144

Sunday 9 April, 2017

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Matthew 21: 1-11

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Provocative acts.

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Kim Jong Un is lying in his bed, but not going to sleep. His mind is running a bit fast for sleep to come – as it hatches a plot. *“I think I’ll test a missile – a noisy one with a big plume of fire coming out its rear. I think I’ll do it in broad daylight, and I’ll point it in the direction of Japan (127 million people who have a highly sensitive atomic history). Then, in case anyone doesn’t notice what I’ve done, I’ll have my state controlled media report it. I’ll use that woman who wears that bright pink jeogori and has just the right balance of pride and excitement in her voice. And then? Then I’ll sit back and wait for the reaction. I’m a provocative little man! And I love it!”*

Martin Luther King is lying in his bed, but not going to sleep. His mind is running a bit fast from sleep to come – as it puts together a plan. *“I need our movement to change gear - to build up its momentum. I need us no longer to be reactionary in anger over things that already have happened, but to be visionary in initiative, looking forward. It needs to be a speech about “building the future” – and it needs to be heard in every village, every hamlet, every state and every city. So I’ve got to do it somewhere where people will notice – a really public place. And I’ve got to do it somewhere where what I’m saying feels like it’s part of the American story – nationhood, people-building, bravery in the face of social injustice. Ha! I’ve got it! The Lincoln memorial – speaking from the feet of a giant Abraham Lincoln. And I’ll frame the start of my speech around the start of his most famous speech. In the spirit of Lincoln – furthering the work of Lincoln – adopting the mana of Lincoln. O yeah, some people will say “who does this black guy think he is?” But that’s fine. If I can provoke them into*

voicing that, then that reveals the problem and makes my point. I'm doing this to get noticed – so provocation's actually the way to go.

Jesus is lying in a bed, but not going to sleep. His mind is running a bit fast for sleep to come – he's thinking about tomorrow. The time has come for him to step things up a bit, bring on that crisis that needs to come. He's been talking about it for a while – not to the amusement of his disciples, who think it's a terrible idea. (“By no means Lord”, they'd said, “this must never happen to you!”) But it **does** have to happen, so he needs to provoke the crisis. As Jesus drifts off to sleep, his last few thoughts are about how he's going to be provocative.

The next day he gets up, tracks down a little donkey, and rides on into town. Is that it? Ballistic missiles – provocative! Seizing of national monuments – provocative! Riding a donkey, entering the city with humility? It doesn't look like an obvious move in the game of provocation. This is a world where, more often than not, humility doesn't even get noticed. If you're trying to attract attention, if you're trying to provoke a crisis, humility's a very odd strategy. Maybe you'd be better to do something like storm the temple and tip over the tables. But maybe my mind's running ahead of itself there. That might be a little extreme. And actually, the donkey thing seems to be working. There **is** a reaction. A crowd is forming. Factions are appearing. Some people are shouting out in support. Others are saying “who does he think he is?” The situation is being described as “city-wide turmoil”. A display of humility provokes a deep dividing of the people. Simply by arriving on a donkey, Jesus plunges the city into chaos. Was the city really that fragile? Was there something else going on? Is there some power in humility that we've not understood? Theories abound!

One of the theories is that Jesus' humility is actually a satirical act. Roman oppressors were always having grand public parades – kind of the equivalent of Kim John Un's flaming missiles. Public displays of the power of the state: spears and banners waved in the air, war horses snorting and stamping. Look out, you general public! Shake before our power and might. Jesus' simple little donkey is a parody of Roman “showing off” – a suggesting that the Emperor really has no clothes. How absurd, how

emaciated-ly thin a display is all that bulked-up pomp and show! Now if you were to say **that** to the insecurities of powerful people, that **would be** provocative. Where oppressors are feeling insecure, when they're feeling like their strength is not so gently being mocked, you might indeed expect something like turmoil.

Another theory is that Jesus has only been pretending to be humble. In fact, the donkey is a symbol of something completely other than humility – something that's connecting culturally, taonga-referentially, with the people. Like Martin Luther King giving a speech on the steps of a public monument to freedom and equality, Jesus' donkey is referencing something important in the people's story. There's this wonderful saying in the heritage of the people: "Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey". Without using words, without making any actual claim, Jesus is saying "I am he – look out, the real **king** is coming." That would explain why people are calling him "Son of David" – putting him, as far as **their** hearts and minds are concerned, right in the royal line. This is a leader. This is the initiation of the power-grab. This is the restoration we've long been waiting for. Our dreamed-of future has begun. That might explain why people are waving palm branches, throwing their clothes on the ground, calling out "Hosanna" – save us Lord! When hopes are re-ignited, you might indeed expect something like turmoil.

Whatever the case, Jesus has deliberately been provocative, and turmoil has been the result. Within the turmoil, some people are enflaming the situation – driving it with their derisive questions. Other people seem to be trying to take some of the heat out of it. "Don't worry", they say, "he's just a the prophet from Nazareth. Don't worry; it's just Joe from Taihape – no need to panic or overreact." It seems that some people want to keep the peace – prevent the crisis that Jesus is deliberately inciting. To the untrained eye, they appear to be the ones working for the peace. In fact they're getting in the way of what Jesus is trying to do. Perhaps he **will** need to follow up with an even more provocative act – might need to revisit that crazy idea of going

into the temple and getting angry. We'll wait and see . . .

But in the meantime we'll think about the God who occasionally provokes. Could it be true that there are times when we, in our place and time, need divine provocation? Could there be times when we need our pomposity challenged, our power-grabbing exposed? Could there be times when we need our lack of clothing revealed – the thinness of our posturing called out (our missiles, big planes and bombastic rhetoric)? And could it be that the people of God, the followers of Jesus, have a responsibility to become part of the way that God's provocation works in the world – deploying on God's behalf some strategic turmoil? Civil disobedience, passive resistance, the use of satire, speaking truth to power in love. Because if turmoil was good for the Master, maybe it's important for the servants. The church as God's chosen fellow provocateurs.

So there it is, Jesus. Kim Jong Un is lying in his bed, but not going to sleep. His mind is running a bit fast for sleep to come – as it hatches a plot. “I think I'll test a missile – a noisy one with a big plume of fire coming out its rear. I think I'll do it in broad daylight, and I'll point it in the direction of Japan.”

What are you going to do about it, Jesus? Knox and Durham Street would like to know! Or is the question being batted right back at us? What are **we** going to do, in Jesus name? Thank God for a story about a deliberately provocative Jesus. May it stay with us – and make us true.

Amen.