

Sermon Archive 155

Sunday 4 June, 2017

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Acts 2: 1-21

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



In 1959 my parents built and moved into a small house down a no-exit farm road in Howick. Howick was a smallish seaside village a pleasant Sunday drive just outside Auckland. It was one of the villages that the government had established in the 1840s as a lookout for unfriendly war canoes coming up from the South. That the highest point in Howick had been named “Stockade Hill” made no apologies for the government’s purposing of the settlement. It was part of a defence network for keeping intruders out.

Howick’s defences were never seriously tested. No unfriendly waka were ever spotted from the lookout. No retreat into the stockade was ever anything more than a drill for the purposes of practice. Nevertheless, Howick seemed to have found its own non-military ways of fulfilling its calling: keeping strangers out. Most of its early streets were named after English aristocrats, bureaucrats or soldiers. Most of its early residents were British military - people whose characters had been formed during long service within an ethos of serving and defending the Queen. A solidly British culture was established from the start and nurtured culturally as the decades slowly turned.

Small progress: in 1968, my formal education began when I was enrolled at one of the local primary schools: “Owairoa”. The school had a Maori name. And it had some Maori students. The photo of my standard three class, Room 15, shows 31 children, including Andrea Herewini. I can’t tell you anything about Andrea, where she lived, what she was like, who her friends were. I can’t tell you these things, not because I’ve forgotten them, but because I never knew them in the first place. The only thing I can tell you, is that Andrea’s is the only brown face in the photo.

I wonder what Andrea thought about our school assemblies - where we sang "God save the Queen" and sometimes recited something called "the flag" - in which, in the latter, we pledged allegiance to the crown and our British identity. Perhaps Andrea said all those words with her fingers crossed. Or perhaps, like us, she just said them with the ignorant innocence of uninformed childhood. Standard three, the year during which I didn't get to know her, was after all two years before Whina Cooper decided to hiko to Wellington. It was four years before Ngāti Whātua confronted us with their belief that Bastion Point was Maori land.

Howick wasn't necessarily a horrible Ku Klux Klan project, but it **was** pretty good at keeping strangers out.

In the early 1980s, back home in old Blighty, Margaret Thatcher started talking to Deng Xiaoping about Hong Kong - and whether, maybe, China would be happy for the soon-to-expire British governance treaties to be extended. China said "no". A large number of Hong Kong Chinese felt nervous about returning to China's bosom, so emigrated to Howick.

White Howick became browner. Streets with English names suddenly featured shops with Chinese signage. One single Chinese takeaway suddenly morphed into a whole suburb called Botany Downs. The dike had broken completely. Attempting humour, but achieving only offensiveness, some established residents declared that Howick had become Chowick. A community that previously had been just about "us", suddenly had to cope with "them", and it wasn't making the transition happily at all. Yes, we **could** have rejoiced in new flavours in our cuisine. We could have admired the lion dances and lanterns. We could have learned how to say "Ni hao". We could have deployed words like "cosmopolitan", "stimulating", "colourful", "vibrant". But instead we complained about their driving, their unwillingness to learn English properly, their living in ghetto-ized neighbourhoods. Our reaction to Chinese arrivals was entirely consistent with the long-established practices that came from our original calling to patrol from the look-out, to spot the difference, and to keep it out. Our reaction didn't stop the wave of diversity; all it did was expose our hearts.

Jerusalem was dealing with a whole lot of people from out of town. Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Mesopotamians, Judeans, Cappadocians, people from Pontus and Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, parts of Libya, Cretans and Arabs, people from Rome. And although you'd like to think, wouldn't you, that this great diversity of people and cultures would be embraced as cosmopolitan colour, a wonderful tapestry, I suspect somewhere, not too far beneath the surface, there's going to be the sentiment "bloody foreigners". It'll be such a relief when they all just go home.

Am I being more cynical than I should? Or isn't this more often than not exactly what happens when a city's under infrastructural pressure and there's a whole lot of cultural differences presenting? The roads are clogged, the number of strangers has increased, the hotels are full, and prices in the shops have exploded.

And in Jerusalem, you've got the added complication of the city being under Roman observation. Soldiers are watching - poised to react strongly if there's any sign of commotion. The last thing you want is noisy visitors - especially visitors who you can't communicate with properly. (What *is* the Phrygian word for "Shhhh"?)

Not that we want to do a Brexit! Not that we want to build a Mexican wall! Not that we want to make immigration an election issue! But can't they just all go home?

Suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability . . . Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? So how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?"

Pentecost, 2017. I note simply that the gospel, the treasured good news once the privilege of just a few people in one smallish community,

is now shared with **all** people. The life of Christ, up until then having only ever been described in one language, is now expressed in many. The era of the Spirit is the era of all people being drawn into the wonder of “God with us”. All voices, all people . . .

I wonder how far that goes. Does it go beyond ethnicity? Is there, do you think, a gay and lesbian voice? Is there a transgender language? Is there a grammar of people with disability? I mention these three, because each of them has had a long history of being hushed up by the Christian church. The Christian church has said of these voices, that they’re really just a drunken noise - “Ha! They’re filled with new wine!” Historically, it’s been easy to sneer. But the era of the Spirit is the era of God’s favour expressed through and for every voice. Peter goes as far as saying that the slaves have a voice, men and women have a voice, young and old have a voice. Even the sun and the moon and blood and fire have a voice. However we’ve structured our society, organised our transactions, worked our power dynamics, in the era of the Spirit **we all** find a voice.

Whatever the undertones may have been sounding in Jerusalem, a new song drowns them out. Whatever doors might have been discretely closing through subtle manoeuvring, a great wind of Spirit blows them open. In the era of the Spirit, every voice is heard.

-ooOoo-

In 1959 my parents built and moved into a small house down a no-exit farm road in Howick - a village established to keep the strangers out. Street names remembering aristocrats, bureaucrats and soldiers. One single Maori child I never got to know. A wave of Mandarin language exposes hearts that are not yet ready. Politics rolling on fear of otherness. Walls and fear and “why won’t they just go home”? And suddenly from heaven there comes a sound, filling the entire house, giving voice for all! The era of the Spirit has come.

We keep a moment of quiet.

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