

Speaking in the Spirit of Christ is Child's Play

A Sermon preached in Knox Church, Christchurch
by the Revd Dr Ken Booth
on Sunday, 9 July 2017

Readings: Zechariah 9:9-12
Matthew 11:16-19 & 25-30

Tomorrow, Bee and I are off overseas for a few weeks. We will miss lots of things, even if we will see lots of interesting things on our travels and catch up with some friends on the way. We will miss you good people here at Knox and our friends in Christchurch and all the usual activities we do. However, one thing we will not miss - the pre-election blather from our politicians. We will get the rising crescendo at the end on our return, but will try to ignore most of that as well.

Not that we can do without politicians. It is not even that politicians aren't mainly nice people in themselves (there are exceptions), but being in politics seems to take them into a world where spin-doctors fashion weasel words that pass for policy. In the scale of trustworthiness, firefighters usually come out on top, but politicians are at the bottom of the list along with second-hand car salesmen. With politicians wheeling and dealing and giving almost nothing away while seeming to promise a lot rather goes with the territory.

So politicians will end up over the next eleven weeks sounding like a cross between the Christmas elves holding some of Santa's goodie-bags and boarding school matrons who know what is best for us. Or they will sound just like children in the market place inviting us to join their game. Some of them will even try to sound like the king in Zechariah. They "will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations, his dominion shall be from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth." In the case of political leaders that does not involve being humble and riding on a donkey. And if you think I'm alone in being a bit cynical about politicians, I noted in the paper this last week that 64% of the country think the

economic system is rigged in favour of the rich and powerful and 56% think politicians don't care about people like them.

When we get this cynical it is worth remembering that in most cases it is the system that forces us into these peculiar places. Our life together is not at all simple, and we create a vast web of trusted institutions and ways of looking at the world to enable us to get on with our life in society. That applies to our laws and our economy. So much of it depends on our trust in the system. We cannot live together without these systems. But sometimes the system can just grind us down; and it may take a child to say, the emperor has no clothes.

This is a clue to the reading from Matthew's Gospel, with Jesus himself in the role of the child saying the emperor has no clothes. Israel had escaped from Egypt and under Moses they had begun the process of developing codes of conduct for ex-slaves. Over the centuries they had built up an impressive body of law and custom that governed how they treated one another in society, all of it guaranteed by the call of God. They believed they were becoming the kind of people, the kind of humanity, that was right and appropriate for people like us. This is how truly to be human in the way God intends.

But like any system it begins to take over, where the system itself becomes more important than what it is meant to deliver. And if you are looking for systems for helping us to be the kind of people we ought to be, there are thousands of options. There are all the major religious systems, Islam, Judaism, Christianity, all three of them in various shapes and forms (protestant, catholic, Shi'a, Sunni, Liberal, Orthodox and all the sub-varieties of each). Then there are philosophical systems ancient and modern, and more recently there are spiritual guides and gurus of very description - look in the Yellow Pages. Given the number of options, you could think that as humans we are very uncertain about who to trust in this business of living the way we ought to truly live in our confusing world.

In Jesus' own day, even among his own people there were several varieties of Judaism on offer to guide them on their life's journey: the way of the Pharisees in a strict interpretation of the law of Moses, the way of the Sadducees with its accommodation to modern customs and

the power of the Romans, the way of the Zealot, who in the interests of purity did not mind killing the occasional Roman in the crowd (think, modern terrorist), or there was the way of the ascetic like John the Baptist or the monkish community down by the Dead Sea - the one that two thousand years later would give us the Dead Sea Scrolls. And in the midst of all this collected wisdom and insight to help our personal and common life, Jesus has the cheek to say, the emperor has no clothes. You've got it all wrong. You've got God.

The church is not immune from the problems that systems cause us either. Both the Presbyterian and Anglican Churches have struggled over the last few decades with issues about the treatment of gays and lesbians and their role in the church. It has been a painful debate and is by no means over. Splits of one sort and another seem inevitable, and none of it is amenable to being solved by firing off tweets. My own Anglican Church has been struggling to stay together over the issue, and I suspect we will break apart before long. In an effort if not to break the deadlock, at least ensure there was some mutual respect, some arrangements have been made to hold what have been called respectful discussions. I went along to one the other week to participate in the discussion. The process was interesting in that it really did avoid shouting matches or soap-box manifestoes or excommunications. It was designed to enable polite listening to different points of view and personal stories. To that extent it was a success. Beyond that it could not go and we were left individually where we were when we began.

Where does that leave us? Exactly where Jesus found himself in the confusion of his own day. Sometimes you have to speak your own truth. We actually like politicians who do that, even when we don't agree with them. There is no guarantee that anyone else will buy your truth, but out of your own integrity you must say how it seems to you. Out there you can find people taking sides for John the Baptist or for Jesus: take your pick. Go the ascetic way and they'll tell you you've got a demon; Talk to those on the fringes of society and the dodgy, and they'll dismiss you as far too worldly.

But divine wisdom is vindicated by what comes out of what Jesus does. Jesus' prayer to God in our reading is fascinating in how he talks about it. "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants." Not another government report from the experts; not another complex and detailed philosophical exploration of the meaning of life; not even a university scholar in sight. It is revealed to infants. So what do they know that the rest of us do not? They are not old enough to do philosophy, or understand political theory, or even to vote. Theirs is a world of innocence and trust. Sometimes that innocence and trust offers the gift of insight that the emperor has no clothes.

Sometimes it is downright scary. It's akin to the bit in Star Wars where Luke Skywalker throws away the book and decides to trust the force. Trust the force? But that is exactly what Jesus invites us to do - the force being Jesus himself. Paul will give it more theological language in the form of the Spirit of Christ in us to such an extent that he can say it is no longer I, it is Christ living in me. And the Spirit shocks the conventional by inviting into Christ's fellowship the outcast and the unlovely, the tax collectors and the prostitutes who will get to heaven before the righteous. It's a strange new world where the spirit of embrace and welcome overcomes the divisions we make, pulls down the barriers between us and begins to forge God's new family in Christ.

About this Spirit we can only speak our own truth. We cannot answer for others and we will not convince the world that we are right, but it is the Spirit in which we may choose to live. It is not just as individuals either - communities also state their convictions, and Knox has its own statement of how this gospel is heard here. We speak this truth for ourselves because here we find one whose yoke is easy and whose burden is light. It is child's play and sometimes it makes us dance.