

Sermon Archive 160

Sunday 30 July, 2017

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Stories normally start at the beginning. Maybe that's because time normally goes not backwards, but forwards. It's just the standard way in story-telling: "start at the very beginning". But today let's try something different. Let's start at the end, and move backwards (careful not to trip), from the end, back to the beginning.

-ooOoo-

Starting at the end we have a big, beautiful tree. It's a giant on the landscape, everyone sees it. It's catching the sun and wind, colour and movement within God's colour and movement. It's an unmissable living thing of strength and scope, of green and beauty. Most of all, it's shelter and shade for God's living creatures, birds, insects, people sitting beneath. It's a home for whom God has made. We all flock to it - moved as if by instinct - as if we too were little birds - knowing that it is where we need to be - where we'll be perfectly placed beneath the canopy. Sit a while with me beneath this tree - this beautiful, sheltering tree that stands so strong and obvious.

Now, remember we're journeying backwards in time. Let's go back a bit, walking backwards (careful not to trip), closer to the beginning. A small tree is present in the garden. It looks healthy enough, forming what looks like a shape that will be pleasant. Although it's clearly solidly established, it's not very big - not the kind of shelter under which you'd have a picnic. It's pretty much like any of the other trees in the garden. Nice; unremarkable. It's probably got a future, but you never know, do you? Remember Jonah's tree - almost at the stage where it could give him some shelter from the sun, when suddenly it just ups and shrivels and dies. Within the uncertainties of the forward movement of time, never count your chickens until they hatch. Hey look! There's a single little bird in the tree - just singing - maybe a sign of something to come - a greater song - or not.

Now let's go back a bit more in time, walking backwards (careful not to trip), closer again to the beginning. There's a tender shoot coming out of the ground, very small and new. If we were going forwards through time, rather than backwards, probably we wouldn't notice it. "I wonder what it is" we might say as we see. Maybe it's one of those weeds planted by the enemy. Or just a nondescript nothing in the garden: one of those many little plants that just do their quiet work of breathing out the oxygen into the great carbon dioxide of the world, and that's about all. Remarkable unremarkability! As we walk backwards through this garden, careful not to tread on the tender shoot. It'd be so easy to squash.

Now let's go back again, walking backwards (careful not to trip), closer again, so close, to the very beginning. Actually, at the beginning there's nothing to see. The seed of the tree is tiny anyway, and actually it's under the ground. Invisible. No sign of life. No sign that here will grow something magnificent. It's here. It's real. It's doing its thing - but you'd never know. Hard to believe when you've arrived here backwards through time. Hard to believe when you know the true nature of what is growing. But back here, near the beginning, going forwards through time, there's nothing to see at all.

I wonder when it was that the people of Jesus' day noticed that something beautiful was growing among them. When did they begin to perceive that there was more before their eyes than a local carpenter? Was it something he said, or did? Or something in his eyes? A look that caused them to take a second glance? It's hard to know, isn't it, when people might have understood that something special was present. The kingdom of God was growing among them - but at the early stages it was probably impossible to tell. Yes, if you're walking backwards, maybe the big things from later will help you spot signs earlier. Resurrection might alert people to the miracles. Pentecost might alert people to the presence. But we don't go backwards through time, do we? In life the tree always begins as the invisible seed - small, undiscerned. So you've got to look at the present, to seek it, to search it. You have to explore the world diligently, carefully, for the tiny little things that prophesy giant blessings to come.

So Jesus tells them a bunch of parables, not just of seeds secretly growing, but of an almost undetectable quantity of yeast in a big fluffy loaf of bread. Of treasure hidden in the corner of a field, of a pearl that so easily could have been missed. Small things of immense value, regularly missed, easily lost, yet

revealed by God and speaking truly of something beautiful that God is growing even now. Small signs of great love.

In a scene from a musical, an old man is asking his wife whether she loves him. It seems it must have been quite some time since love has been expressed in words. The woman replies:

*For twenty-five years I've washed your clothes
Cooked your meals, cleaned your house
Given you children, milked YOUR cow
After twenty-five years, why talk about love right now?*

He says:

"I know..."

But do you love me?

She says to herself:

Do I love him?

For twenty-five years I've lived with him

Fought with him, starved with him

Twenty-five years my bed is his

If that's not love, what is?

Their home is full of little signs of a love that is deep: cooking a meal, milking the cow, sharing a bed at the end of the day, hungering together and creating life together. But he's not seeing the little signs. They're like hidden treasures, pearls that are easily missed. They're like seeds beneath the surface, a few little grams of yeast. In the daily busyness that comes upon us, in that "uninformed forward momentum through time", they're easy to miss. So he's left seeking assurance about love. If maybe he heard that she loved him, then the silent signs would begin to speak again - and he would not only hear them, he would learn to appreciate, to love them as he himself is loved.

Perhaps the greatest gift that God could give to people like us is a chance to walk differently through time - to do something like we did at the start of this sermon - to begin our search for the seed, our noticing of the sapling, with a memory of the great love that waits to claim us. To have a vision of the beautiful culmination of God's love-story, so we can recognize its earlier

stages in the small things that are all around us. The trouble is that time goes forward, not backwards; and we people of these middle years have no memory of the future. A “memory of the future” is oxy-moronic. It has no logical sway. We can’t have a memory of the love that is to come.

What we do have, though, is a memory of that love expressed through an exceptional life that was lived among us - a life that was like a magnificent tree in which God’s creatures found shelter. A life that expressed patience and grace. A life that was truly companionable, restorative, and just. A life that was a tree, a treasure, a pearl of great price.

I wonder if we learned to meditate upon that life, to abide within it, how long it might be before we began to see little signs in our lives of that self-same life. I wonder how full our world might become of pearls and mustard seeds and yeasty bubbles. And I wonder whether that meditating upon the life isn’t what Jesus had in mind when he finished off his parables with the image of kingdom people bringing out of their treasure what is new and what is old. Bringing out the treasure; beholding it; taking it into our hands, delighting in it; letting it change the way we walk through its earlier signs.

Maybe in allowing us to remember the life of Jesus, and in daring us to believe that it continues among us, are we receiving a pearl, a treasure, a tree. Maybe . . . Or maybe life’s just designed to keep us blind and trampling on the saplings. Walk carefully as you go!

-ooOoo-

People of Knox; I think that the life of Jesus is God’s gift to us. I think that it *is* possible to see the world from a position of grateful remembering. I think that worshipful meditation on the person of Jesus will allow us to see many signs of God’s presence among us. And I hope that we, ourselves, are early signs of something beautiful that God is growing.

So we pray, we seek, we search. We walk carefully, not tripping, rejoicing in the gift of God. The kingdom of God is like a tree, a pearl, a loaf, a treasure. The listening, the looking, the seeing. It quietly begins.

Amen.

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