

Sermon Archive 165

Sunday 10 September, 2017

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: 1 Corinthians 3: 1-9

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



My first attempt at this sermon led me quickly into material that was just too hard. Science-y stuff! Thinking about the appearance of a flower, something new, within an environment that had appeared to be trending towards sleep and darkness, I started thinking about the mystery of renewal within a decaying order - an order of entropy. Entropy - that gradual loss of energy over time - that slow dissipation by which the universe gradually winds down and stops. Wasn't there some law of physics about it? - how the big picture of the universe is all about things getting slower, colder, quieter? If so, then what a bold, system-defying gesture a flower is! A flourish of growth within an assurance of decay! This was a worthy theological theme for Spring Flower Sunday. All I needed to do was become an expert in thermodynamics and entropy in three short days. I wasn't even through my second Wikipedia article (the science of change and the nature of time, entropy's role in chaos theory), when I admitted defeat. In the spirit of Saint Therese, known as "Therese, the Little Flower", I declared to my science-ignorant self: *"Leaving to great souls [and] great minds the beautiful books I cannot understand, I rejoice to be little . . ."*

The only vaguely comprehensible thing I found was an article on "social entropy" - the gradual, irreversible loss of energy from the forces that keep cultures together. The slow dissipating of the norms, beliefs and commitments that give societies cohesion. The gradual fragmenting of communities into lifeless, disconnected smaller parts. Something like a church descending into factions. (He belongs to Paul! She belongs to Apollos! Who the hell are you?) Unity breaks. Social cohesion dissolves. Whether the people of Corinth would have understood the expression "social entropy", as unity fragmented they knew its reality only too well. As, I suspect, do we.

In the so-called **United** States, having moved on from last year's divisive election campaign, the nation seems to have entered an era of quickening fragmentation. It seems, for some reason, that people have now found

permission to express divisions more boldly. People are finding it easier to divorce their neighbours, simply because some of them are black or Mexican. Others are finding it harder to express social cohesion, because **their** neighbours are wearing hoods and burning crosses. Doubts are being expressed that some groups will ever be able to live with others in peace. And with the impending cancelation of DACA, a compassionate Obama immigration compromise, designed to give security to children of illegal immigrants, a huge drain of energy is being drawn from the batteries of social cohesion. I belong to Paul. You belongs to Apollos. Who do the “dreamers” belong to? No, they’ve never really lived anywhere other than in America. No, **they** didn’t break any laws in going there. And no, the dreams after which they’ve been named are no different from what their neighbours call “the American dream”, but they don’t belong! Social entropy.

Here in our country, while we’re much better off than that, we do indeed have our own examples. Social entropy is enshrined, I think, in some of the election promises we are hearing. A number of parties are promising immigration restriction. One is promising to withdraw social welfare from longer-termed unemployed youth. It is claimed that by their laziness and poor life choices, the young have put themselves beyond the social contract. In terms of social responsibility, they no longer belong to us. And one politician, in a moment of pure political genius, declared that law breakers ought to lose their human rights. Does she really mean that some human beings should be treated constitutionally, politically, morally, as less than human? Social entropy is large on our landscape. It is into this kind of landscape that Paul introduces the idea of the God who gives growth - the One who plants a flower in a winter garden. The One who flourishes newness within the system of decay. God as a protest song against the death of everything. It is to **that** God, who goes against the entropy, that Paul says we belong - all of us. I plant. Apollos waters. But God gives the growth. Miraculously, within the entropic order, we find the surprise, the mystery, of the God of growth.

In praise of the God of growth, I present four stories.

At McDonalds in Hastings, people placed an order with seventeen year old Jershon Tatana. They placed the order in te reo Maori. There’s been some speculation about why they did that - and filmed it. Some have suggested it was to provoke a culturally contentious event just prior to Maori Language Week - showing a Maori question being answered in English response -

another example of zero interest in the bicultural journey. “We belong to Maori. You belong to English. He belongs to Paul, she belongs to Apollos. Nobody’s caring or trying!”

Jershon took their order, understood it perfectly, and replied in fluent reo. He’d attended Kura Kaupapa through primary and intermediate school. He speaks te reo all the time at home. That is intellectual growth. That is cultural growth. That is relational growth for people who might have assumed that they inhabited separate worlds. I understand that more and more people now, brown and white, are ordering McDonalds in Hastings in Maori. Growth in confidence. Growth in bi-cultural expression. Growth in community. “He iwi tahi tatou!” Against a prevailing culture of social entropy, I rejoice in the God of growth.

Story Two. A recent social media notification from the International Refugee Assistance Project went like this:

Do you remember Aya? She’s an Iraqi refugee, and nearly two years ago, we put over one million signatures on a petition to resettle her family in America. Unfortunately that didn’t work, and her appeal was rejected. Perhaps it was a blessing because the political climate for refugees had begun to take a turn for the worse. I didn’t provide any updates because her lawyers asked me to keep a low profile while they explored other options. After several setbacks, I began to conclude it was a lost cause . . . But her lawyers never gave up. [They] worked for years on Aya’s case, for zero cost. As a result of their unending advocacy, Aya and her family have just arrived in their new home — Switzerland! Aya can finally pursue the education she’s dreamed about. I can’t wait to see what she does with her life.

When a lawyer works gratis, when a family finds welcome in a new home, when a young woman now can pursue an education, it’s a flower within the prevailing culture of social entropy. I rejoice in the God of growth.

Story Three, from Benton Harbour, Michigan. It’s of a crooked police officer, going to work one day with the intention of putting someone / anyone under arrest for drug dealing. When Andrew Collins put Jamell McGee under arrest, he planted evidence and falsified the report. Describing the four years he spent in prison, the innocent Jamell said “I lost everything. My only goal was to seek him when I got home, and to hurt him.”

When Andrew Collins was eventually discovered to have falsified many other arrest reports, he himself was sent to prison. Upon his release he found himself, through a faith-based community employment agency, working at a café called Mosaic. Also on staff was Jamell McGee. Interviewed by a journalist, Andrew reports having said to Jamell “honestly, I have no explanation. All I can do is say I’m sorry.” Jamell tells the reporter “That was pretty much what I needed to hear”. The reporter observes that the two men now are friends. Andrew speaks of the time recently when Jamell actually told him that he loved him. Andrew says: “I just started to weep, because he doesn’t owe me that. I don’t deserve that, you know.” The reporter asks Jamell “Did you forgive for his sake, or for yours?” Jamell replies “No, for **OUR** sake. [And] not just **us**”, says Jamell, pointing at himself and Andrew, but for **OUR** sake”, gesturing at the whole room.

When people move from seeking revenge to forgiving for the sake of the whole human family, when new friendships displace old enmities, it’s like a flower within the social entropy. And when I see it, I rejoice in the God of growth.

One last story. In a church lounge last Sunday night, a group of Christians met to listen to a Muslim talking about her faith and life. Their questions were respectful, at times touching on sensitive matters: what’s it like to be easily identifiable in public as a Muslim when some members of the public are Islamophobic? What do you say to those who do awful things in the name of the faith you hold? What do you mean when you talk about angels? Why does your husband wear a hat? She answered all questions honestly and with a strange mix of strength and gentleness. I think you could say we now have a deeper understanding of her. I think you could say that our grasp of Islam is more personal, less merely academic. She met us. We met her. Understanding deepened. Within a wider culture of social entropy, I rejoice in the God of growth.

Those were four stories. There is, working within our social entropy, a God of growth. We are called to plant and to water, in that God’s name.

On a Spring flower Sunday, the sermon ends there. Let the flowers grow! Amen.

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