

Sermon Archive 167

Sunday 24 September 2017

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: 1 Timothy 2: 1-7
John 18: 38a

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



These days I start the writing part of my sermons on a Thursday. Here's what I wrote on Thursday.

By the time I deliver this sermon, we will have had a general election. At this stage no one quite knows how it's likely to go. Recent polls had Labour surging ahead, but latest polls have National doing a resurgence. Everyone's calling it "close". The Greens are looking safer than they seemed during their most serious slump, but still not particularly strong. The Maori party looks like it'll retain one electorate, but maybe lose one of its MPs. Epsom is being Epsom. Mana's return looks unlikely. Ohariu's moved from likely red to possibly blue. The New Zealand Herald poll has the upper number of New Zealand First members at 7, with a lower number of zero. How's that for a margin of error! Large numbers of people have early voted, but no one quite knows what the significance of that is. And with a Mixed Member Proportional system, it may be by Sunday, and the delivering of the sermon, no one will know who the government will be. In the congregation you *might* have people rejoicing. You *might* have people lamenting. But you'll probably have most people *wondering*. By the time you hear Paul's advice to Timothy, "pray for kings and all who are in high positions", you'll have no idea who you need to pray for. Or maybe you will! This is perhaps just the downside of writing a sermon on a Thursday.

That's what I write today, now, on Thursday 21 September.

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Well, now on Sunday, as the sermon goes live, how did the cards fall yesterday? I don't know, because for me, as I project the grammar of this sermon into Sunday, I'm really still in Thursday! But I do know, even back here in Thursday, is that by Sunday our country will still need to pray for the good governance of

our country. We still will need to encourage, support, challenge, hold to account, the people who will form our parliament. We still will need to keep in our concern, to reflect responsibly within the God in whom we live, move and have our being, the performance of those we have elected. And we will need to do these things perhaps not actually so much for **their** sake, but for the sake of all who are governed - the people. For while the elected ones may come and go, may scrape in, or be scraped out, the needs of the people remain. He tangata, he tangata, he tangata - the people.

As Paul is presented writing to Timothy, he notes that prayers **are** to be said for monarchs and all who are in high positions. And then he explains why. The prayers are to be said for the sake of the people - that they may lead lives that are quiet and peaceable, with godliness and dignity, the coming by everyone into knowledge and truth. That, in this part of Paul's critique, is what government is for: quiet and peaceable life, godliness and dignity, the knowing of truth.

Without great fanfare, I want to spend a bit of time thinking through those three things.

A quiet and peaceable life. If the expression were "quiet and peaceful" that would be one thing. Peace as an inheritance, something that is given. A state of being which is undisturbed, tranquil. But Paul does not say quiet and peaceful. He says quiet and peaceable. Peaceable means inclined towards, creative of, committed to peace. A peaceable life is not an undisturbed life. It is a life consecrated to the achievement of peace. That might mean the stress of walking into situations of conflict. It might mean robust engagement with injustice. It might mean speaking to the United Nations about what to do with disturbers of the peace. (Editorial note - I'm pretty sure that in that context "peaceable" doesn't mean using phrases like "Rocket man", "totally destroy", and "suicide mission". I'm pretty sure it doesn't mean delivering a speech that the impartial Swedish foreign minister called "the wrong speech, at the wrong time, to the wrong audience". There was no quiet. If there was an eventual goal of peace, the goal was subverted by the means to the end.) Government towards peaceable life, has to be government that enables the people to work for peace. Peaceable government has to enable you and me to live better, more creatively, more fairly, with our neighbours. Not government that enflames. Not government that leaves alone, but government that improves the sharing of life.

Paul speaks, secondly, of godliness. It's a slightly controversial suggestion from Paul to a culture where we have clear separation of church and state. We might feel OK about religious people opting into godly life - prayer, piety, worship. But whether secular government should aim for people living godly lives is much less clear. Godliness as a goal for a secular government just doesn't sound right. Unless you think a little more carefully about what "godly" means. If it means praying, fasting, worshipping, if it means reciting creeds and affirming confessions, then none of that feels like government business. But what if godliness is something else. When Paul speaks about God, in the context of praying for governors, he characterises God as one "who gave himself a ransom for all." Paul speaks about the giving of self for the welfare of the other. Living for others. In one famous description of one particular form of democracy it's government of the people, by the people, *for* the people. Not government that serves itself. Not the base salary paid to people in parliament. But the keeping in mind, and in heart, that it is not about those who govern, but about those who are governed. It's about the people in the hospitals. It's about the children living in poverty. It's about the Indian dairy owners in Mt Roskill. It's about making sacrifices for the humble and meek.

Paul speaks, thirdly, of dignity. I remember the first time I visited parliament, going into the public gallery of our house of representatives. I saw some people reading newspapers, some people snoozing. I heard people interjecting while others spoke - shouting rude, unhelpful suggestions. It seemed to me not to be a house of dignity. But Paul means more than that, when he calls for government that creates dignity. Again it's not about the dignity of the governors; it's dignity for the people. Dignifying treatment of those who are governed. That is dignified treatment of the children we are educating. It means dignified treatment of people applying for benefits. It means dignified treatment of people with special needs. It means dignified treatment of those we are correcting in our prisons. It means dignified treatment of refugees and others seeking a better, safer place to live. It means dignified treatment of all people whom the government serves. To treat people as humans. To treat them as possessors of inalienable rights. To treat them as the governors themselves would wish to be treated. Governance for dignity.

Lastly, Paul speaks of everyone coming to the knowledge of the truth. This is not always an easy one for governors. One famous governor, in one famous

test of political character, was heard to say “what is truth” - as if truth were nothing. We’ve always had cover-ups and secrets in our politics. In the contest of ideas, there’s always been the bending and flexing of fact, the massaging of messages in to convey confusion. On Wednesday evening, exploring how Jacinda Ardern’s insistence that she wouldn’t raise taxes sat next to Bill English’s insistence that she **would**, Patrick Gower accused Bill English of speaking untruly. Mr English explained that since the tax cuts for next April had already been legislated for in this year’s budget, the new lower tax rates were already technically in place. So if Labour cancelled the cuts, that would, technically, constitute a **raising** of taxes. Technically. Patrick Gower suggested that America’s great post-truth era had arrived on New Zealand shores. Whether you agree or not with that will depend on how closely you think technical truth sits next to the idea of truth, whole truth and nothing but truth. It’s certainly closer to truth than “I did not have sexual relations with that woman”. But is it a bit too close to Kellyanne Conway’s “alternative facts”? Not sure! But when Paul is imploring us to pray for government, he certainly has a high view of, and places a high value on, truth. And indeed, when Jesus is trying to explain his own “kingly authority and rationale” to Pontius Pilate, he says it’s all about truth. “For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.” The falling and failing Roman governor responds, as already noted, by saying “what is truth?”

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So there it is. A sermon written on Thursday, for delivery on Sunday - the other side of a general election. Uncertain outcome. Not sure (then or now) about the result. But fed by God anyway, with thoughts about the purpose of government, the people ponder. Quiet and peaceable life - the enablement of peace-makers. Godliness, living for the sake of the other. Dignity, the dignified and dignifying treatment of every human being. Truth - honesty of word and deed. Government not for the sake of the government, but for the sake of the people. As the formation of New Zealand’s next parliament and government begins, Paul calls us to pray for the people.

A moment of quiet.

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