

Sermon Archive 169

Sunday 8 October 2017

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: Psalm 37: 1-7

Luke 10: 38-42

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Sue's road to Damascus began one day when she was draining residual dye from a piece of fabric she'd been preparing for a quilt. Suddenly she realised that the water going down the drain was full of chemicals, and that once they'd travelled a bit by storm water drain, they were going to end up pouring into the beach she visited every morning on her early morning walk. It was a beautiful beach. It was a soul-restoring beach. It was a beach that welcomed and calmed her every day. And she was pouring chemicals into it. The road to Damascus, a moment of realisation, a point of aha, a point of resolving to do something differently. Quilts henceforth, for Sue, would carry only the colours of natural dyes - teas, roots, vegetables. Or they would feature only recycled fabrics - fabrics that already had had their impact on the planet. Chemical dying now was a thing of the past. What was the result? Well, the result was that the colour pallet in Sue's quilts became gentler. Less vivid, but more delicate. Less striking, but more calming. Contrasts softened, shades blended. Quilts began to feel different - more like the calm of the beach she was no longer polluting.

Next step down the road. Reflecting on the "material-related" change of mood in her quilts, Sue began to think not only about material, but also about production process. Was there a way of making quilts, a different mode of action, that might mirror, or complement, her new approach to material? For years Sue had been carried along with the latest developments in quilting techniques - the latest sewing machine, the quilting gadgets-du-jour, to make quilts faster, stronger, straighter. What might happen if she put all that technical hardware to one side, and took a giant step backwards - back to using what quilters used to use? An old-fashioned needle and thread? The first discovery along this stretch of the road, was that needle and thread slowed the process way down. It took longer to make a quilt. And I guess that that would be a bad thing - if quilt-making is something best done at speed. But Sue was

finding that at a slower pace the process felt more peaceful - more rested. And she found that, at a slower pace, she was having a longer engagement with each part of the material. In one quilt, she found herself handling an old shirt she used to wear when singing in a choir. With the material in her hands, she found herself remembering the singing, remembering singers, remembering the songs. At the slower pace, with the more immediate “resting in her hands” experience, the process was giving her space to remember, to reconnect with people and events that busier people might never have time to remember. A slower pace was gifting her with opportunities to notice, to recall, to give gratitude. She liked that very much.

Next step down the road. Talking to some of her fellow quilt-makers about what she’d learned, she invited them to give it a try as well. Here’s what Serena found.

When I was first invited to make a totally hand-stitched piece for this exhibition, my reaction was one of reluctance! I hadn’t stitched anything completely by hand for years and I really wasn’t sure if I wanted to go down that path again. The brief was to make a quilt using only second hand / pre-worn fabric, with no use of fancy gadgets and no new purchases for it all. Of course I already had a collection of fabric / old clothing precious to me that I had long held on the basis that at some point in the future I would work them into some sort of patchwork. Using an old blanket as the batting, I sorted my fabric and started to sew, with the quiet, repetitive motion of stitching generating plenty of time to remember the associations of each piece of cloth. And I found I was slowly absorbed into what was becoming for me a rich and tangible version of memory, where I could stitch myself back into its very core. It was so much more rewarding than I ever expected. From being simply a piece to produce for the show, it became a quilt that I will continue to stitch into for a very long time, something so much more than merely the sum of its parts.

And this is what another quilter, Dorothy, discovered. She writes:

In 2008 I shattered my right arm and elbow and was fearful of losing my arm. But after many months of operations, plastic surgery and therapy, I began to sew again, and with the help of friends, I made this quilt. It took 2 years, lots of love (and some tears), but life is wonderful again.

Dorothy calls her quilt “Treasure your friends”.

Those who have risen to the challenge of working more slowly, and with pre-loved material, end up being surprised by memory, by deep connections, by different perspective on their own stories. No, they're not producing vividness quickly. No, they're not riding the crest of the latest trend. They're slowly and deeply being engaged in connectedness. They're caring for, and receiving care from, more well-worn material. From fast, to reluctant, to slower, to blessed.

Let's try a little experiment. Let's be still together, saying nothing, doing nothing, for thirty seconds after I say, from the psalm, "be still, and know that I am God."

-ooOoo-

A famous story about advice given to a speeding person. "Martha, Martha", says Jesus; "you're distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing." Jesus says this to a woman who's been behaving like a tornado. Frantic in the house, so much work to do with so little time! So much so she's beginning to resent those around her who appear to be doing nothing - hurry up! "Martha, Martha, slow down". Jesus is on the side of slowing things down.

In defence of Martha, it's often conceded that *someone* needs to cook the meal. *Someone* needs to set the table. If everything was just prayer and contemplation, we'd all get pretty hungry. I don't think, though, that Jesus is suggesting that nobody ever do anything. But he's certainly calling Martha away from the distress of being distracted by too many things. And maybe, by calling her name twice, by using her name as a circuit-breaker, he's waking her to the human possibility or purpose right in front of her eyes. Why is she busy with too many things? If it's because she wants to receive Jesus, to welcome him, well here he is! Right in front of her, calling her name. What did the quilters learn? That they had life stories, that other people were a precious part of that. That in being gentle, they receive gentleness. Perhaps that is all part of the "one needful thing". Slowing down, noticing what is before us, not hell-bent on many things; rather, finding company and wholeness in the one important thing.

Let's try another little experiment. Let's be still together, saying nothing, doing nothing, for sixty seconds after I say, from the psalm, "be still, and know that I am God."

-ooOoo-

Matthew, Matthew. Who do you think this is, trying to speak to you? Be still, old man, and maybe you'll hear me. I know you're distracted by many things. It's not your fault, really. You're just typical of anyone who has a sense of duty. You know that certain jobs just have to be done, and I've seen you celebrate inwardly the small achievements - like doing the ironing and mowing the lawns. And I've seen you eyeing up your diary - feeling nervous about all the things that'll need to have been done by Christmas. I know you're asking yourself "Where did the year go?" Don't fret, Matthew. Be still.

I have watched you growing, changing. When you were at university, you'd write your essays with music in the background. These days you write your sermons in silence. You work best in the quiet. And when you first started cooking, the more complicated the recipe the better. Now you've just bought a book called "Five Ingredients". You're de-cluttering your cooking. And when you first started preaching, you'd speak about all three readings, and try to say everything that ever had been said. Now, in your sermons you're finding space for silence. As I read your development, I think you're beginning to respond to what I say. "Be still".

Always take time to remember, Matthew, that your life is a story that I long to read - and that I'm helping to write. Always take time to remember the people I have put around you, through whom you've been blessed. Never feel like those five impossible things have to be believed before breakfast - or even by the end of the day. Be still. Let this moment be a road to Damascus, a retrieving of a pace of faith and life that gives you room to hear me, and to let me remind you of the good that you have received. Do the work that needs to be done. Aim for what is good, but always be slow, be still. That is the better part.

How do we end this sermon? A moment of quiet.

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