

## Sermon Archive 175

Sunday 12 November, 2017

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Matthew 25: 1-13

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Being there. Two church services and a parable.

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Having come to some form of Christian faith in my mid to late teens, I experienced what the experts refer to as a “sense of call” in my early twenties. Submitting myself to the assessment processes of the Presbytery and then the National Church, I was assessed as being “suitable, but not ready”. The young man needed to get a bit older, gain some life experience. I remember expressing some irritation at the assessment. If I was suitable, and ultimately heading towards ministry, what was the point in not just getting on with it. If you have a plan, then why not implement it. Delays are stupid. In expressing that view, I did, of course, prove the point that life experience was indeed something I lacked.

I had no choice, however, other than to wait. The view of the institution had been stated, and it wasn’t going to change. If I had banged on the door, and insisted on being admitted, a voice from within would have replied “Truly, I tell you, I do not know you”.

And so it was that I got on with the job of finding something else to do. It didn’t need to be the kind of job that would make me lots of money or create a professional future - because I had no long-term commitment to it. It was just (in my early assessment) something to do while time went by. During my three year Bachelor of Arts programme at Auckland University, I had caught the Howick bus in and out of the city each weekday. I had watched the bus drivers squeezing their large vehicles through the traffic, grinding their way through the gears, double clutching all the way. I determined that I would quite like to give that a go, so offered my services (initially for a year) to the Howick and Eastern Bus Company.

On my first day at work, I remember going into the drivers' lunch room, and feeling not all that welcome. I wasn't fully aware at that time (lack of life experience) that new drivers were always turning up for work, lasting a couple of days, then leaving. The drivers had kind of moved on from welcoming people who never stayed. Nor was I aware that a lot of the drivers hated university students. Students were privileged, arrogant passengers who wouldn't know hard work if it punched them in the face. And here was this skinny student of philosophy, this pie in the sky Christian, turning up to play "bus drivers".

For training, I was allocated to Cyril Carson, a patient Irishman who clearly didn't mind spending time with the unpopular. He was to teach me the ticket system, and to reveal to me various road traps for young players - certain shop verrandahs that frequently bit the top, left, back corner of any bus pulling too acutely out of the Panmure bus stop, how to tag-team drive in some curious process called "double banking", and how to drive within the timetable. Part of my becoming educated in the timetable involved Cyril taking over the driving whenever my driving had put us late. He took over the driving each time with patience - it never felt like a criticism or a punishment. However, every time one of the other drivers, driving in the opposite direction saw Cyril in the driver's seat, not me, I always felt their on-road wave to Cyril was kind of infused with a dollop of glee. Ha! The up-start know-it-all has fallen behind. He who presumed he easily could do what we do all day, is struggling. As I processed that kind of thing could, I suppose you could say I was gaining life experience.

Well, I drove buses at Howick for a year, and picked up a few other life experiences. I then drove during the university holidays for the next seven years. I then drove full time again for about eight months while waiting to be discovered by a parish in need of a brand new minister. I left the Howick bus company to begin ministry at Iona Church, Blockhouse Bay. On the evening of my ordination, 29 July 1993, the back two rows of the church were full of bus drivers.

Being there matters. Being there says much. Being there is the important thing.

I took a wedding the other day - and it was a really good one. For their Bible

reading, the couple had chosen that passage from Ecclesiastes - "for everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven." In what is certainly my shortest ever wedding sermon, and probably one of my best, I simply noted that if there is a time for everything, then this time, this now, is the time for marrying. I said "let's just not rush through this moment. Let's be present in it - so we can remember it well and with deep gratitude. Look at each other. Look at the people who have gathered around you, to love you and support you."

Obediently, the couple paused, and looked at the people surrounding them. Being there matters. It is the important thing. In years to come, people may not remember what colour the flowers were, how nicely tied the groom's tie was, what font the hymn sheets were printed in. But they will always remember facing each other, and being surrounded by people who loved them. Being there matters. It is the important thing.

Jesus tells a parable, a story about a wedding. It's a pretty strange kind of wedding in that there doesn't seem to be a bride. She gets no mention - maybe it's a cultural thing. Nor, to start with, is the groom there. He's somewhere else. The people who are there are the bridesmaids, some of them wise, some of them foolish, all of them sleepy. We're not privy to their list of duties, but high on the list seems to be waiting for the arrival of the bridegroom - welcoming him when he comes. (Look at the people around you. The back two rows full of bus drivers. Being there. Isn't that the really important thing?)

Somewhere during the waiting process, lamps become the important thing. Got to get the lamps lit. (The knot of the bridegroom's tie, the font of the hymn sheet - got to get these things right!) And such is this usurping of importance, that the foolish ones race off in a panic to attend to it - so that when the bridegroom actually arrives, they are not there. Not being there. Not engaged with the important. In this parable, foolishness might indeed be the lack of planning ahead - but it is also allowing oneself to be distracted from the important thing by smaller things that really don't matter. The wise ones were the ones who were there for the groom's arrival. Being there. The really important thing.

The sermon began with the story of someone being told to get some life experience. Part of that experience has been of people being there. There are good and beautiful “being there” stories to tell. But part of life experience has also been of people **not** being there, of people getting confused about what’s important, of people failing one another because they’re living distracted lives with warped priorities. Our stories include parents not being there for their children. Listening ears not being there for the troubled teen. The phone isn’t answered, the door isn’t opened. Partners, friends, colleagues not there. In last week’s sermon Ralph McTell sang “So how can you tell me you’re lonely?” Well, Ralph, we can sometimes tell you that with genuine conviction, because sometimes people aren’t there. Distracted by the unimportant, they’re just not there. “Truly I tell you, I do not know you!”

And we can tell stories also of Christian denominations not being there, because they’ve become distracted by things that suddenly seemed so important, but weren’t. We have to attend to the purity of the church! Singular human sexual expression is an urgent need - so we need to attend to all that! Off we went to find the oil for the lamp that doesn’t matter. Until suddenly we’re not there - losing the important matter of being there. (“Truly I tell you, I do not know you.”) Wisdom, in this parable, is that which enables us to be present for the main event - an event which is somehow about welcome, about greeting, about receiving, about being there. Will we remember the font of the hymn sheet? The knot in the bridegroom’s tie? Being there.

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Having come to some form of Christian faith in my mid to late teens, I experienced what the experts refer to as a “sense of call” in my early twenties. I went off on a journey. May our faith enable us to be there for God, and for one another. May it enable us to avoid distraction by the unimportant. May it make the world less lonely. May it silence the expression “Truly I tell you, I do not know you.” May it open the door. May it say “I **do** know you. Come in. I am here.” We keep a moment of quiet.

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