

Sermon Archive 177

Sunday 26 November, 2017

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Matthew 25: 31-46

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



In an African prison: Prisoner 46664 was imprisoned initially for a term of five years for having provoked industrial unrest and leaving the country without permission. While serving his time, police investigations uncovered evidence of further crimes - of rather more serious nature. Four counts of sabotage were brought against him, along with one of conspiring to violently overthrow the government. Found guilty of each of these new charges, he was sentenced to life imprisonment. The prosecution had called for the death penalty, but the court denied that request.

In prison, Prisoner 46664 was put to hard labour, mainly breaking large rocks into fine gravel. The rock breaking area was in an unshaded lime quarry - where long exposure to bright glare damaged the eyesight of the prisoners. They were forbidden from wearing sun glasses. At night, working from his small cell (2.4 metres by 2.1 metres), 46664 slowly worked his way through a correspondence law degree from the University of London. I'm a bit surprised he managed to do that, since he'd been categorised as a highest-risk, lowest-class prisoner who was permitted only one visit and one letter every six months. He'd been subject to internal discipline several times for having been found in possession of smuggled news clippings. He was considered troublesome, and frequently attracted verbal and physical harassment from the prison guards. On a couple of occasions he organised hunger strikes and slow labour protests. For his troubles, he was put into solitary confinement multiple times. He was considered to be a devious, dangerously intelligent, political stirrer; and prison probably was the best place for him. Following twenty seven years of incarceration, Prisoner 46664 was released and elected South Africa's first black President. Hiding inside a troublesome prisoner was Nelson Mandela. Who would have thought it.

In a German prison: A prisoner is dreaming up a poem. It's a poem about what it's like hearing other prisoners weeping at night. The sobs echo off the

concrete walls of the corridor linking the cells. The poems and letters this prisoner manages to smuggle out of prison are a strange mixture of trivial observations, simple requests (can you send me some tomatoes), and profound ideas. He's in jail, much like Prisoner 46664, for crimes of sedition. He's been declared a danger to the state. He's been caught up in plots to kill senior figures in the government. He's been associated with those who've aided and abetted declared enemies of the state. I guess these days you'd call him a "terrorist". He's such a shrewd manipulator of people that he's tricked a number of the guards into smuggling information in and out of prison. That makes them compromised - caught in a dangerous situation. He must be a very crafty character - and it's probably best that he's in prison. This prisoner wrote a book called *The Cost of Discipleship* - a modern classic of Christian theology. He was a founding figure of the Confessing Church, pretty much the only religious body to stand up against the genocidal programmes of Nazi Germany. His books have given impetus to generations of readers wanting to think through issues of Christian conviction and political responsibility. Hiding inside a troublesome prisoner was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Who would have thought it!

In an American prison: This prisoner (118593) is a recidivist and, honestly, just a pain in the neck. This is his thirteenth arrest. It makes you wonder whether he's capable of learning! Each of the arrests is after some protest, some causing of civil unrest. In one of his illegal campaigns, later dubbed "the Children's Crusade", journalists noted that this prisoner had let young people and children participate - children exposed to the water canons and police dogs. What kind of a man hides behind a human shield of children? Even those close to 118593, who technically share his philosophy, are telling him (from outside the jail) to pull his head in. He's wearing thin the small amount of sympathy the movement used to get, and damaging the cause. His impatience is unattractive. His refusal to take advice is chronic. He's a law unto himself. Later biographers will note that he also seemed to have trouble being faithful to his wife. That's not illegal, of course, - just another layer of reasons to dismiss him as a loathsome human being.

A few arrests later (eventually he'd clock up 29 of them), at yet another disruptive event (see, he doesn't learn - can't cope with authority), this many-time prisoner said "I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident: that

all men are created equal.' . . . I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream . . .

Hiding inside a troublesome prisoner was Martin Luther King. Who would have thought it!

In a New Zealand prison: This prisoner is serving a life sentence for murder. He's been convicted of brutally, violently, killing a defenceless woman - leaving the crime scene splattered with blood. Born with foetal alcohol syndrome, he's not done well with his education. Mis-parented in many ways, he's drifted into associations with the Mongrel Mob. Very young the first time he made someone pregnant. If prison sentences are how society expresses its disapproval, then "life sentence" says "there is no room in our world for you - forever. We don't want you back". This was said to Teina Pora; and hiding inside Teina Pora was an innocent man. Who would have thought it!

In another New Zealand prison - well sort of . . . This prisoner doesn't have a number, and technically isn't serving any formal sentence. And yet his freedom has been taken away - he can't go to the places he wants to go to. He lives in Johnsonville, Wellington, and his name is Benjamin Paradza. He used to be a high court judge in Zimbabwe. Pressurised by the government of Robert Mugabe to convict an opposition member of parliament, Judge Paradza refused. He found the opposition member "not guilty". Immediately he himself was arrested and prosecuted for corruption. Convicted, released on bail, awaiting sentence, he was advised by friends that outside the judicial process, measures were being made for him to be "taken care of". In Zimbabwe, at that time, "being taken care of" usually involved mysterious disappearance and death. Fearing for his life, this convicted person fled to New Zealand. He is grateful to New Zealand for the protection it has given him. He had made friends here, and been admitted to the bar - so he's practising law here. But he cries for his homeland, and wants to go there. Maybe this is also a kind of prison. Inside this troubled prisoner, is a good man who just wants to go home. He speaks and keeps the truth. Who would have thought it!

In a Roman prison, for just a very short time: This prisoner's being fast-

tracked so he doesn't cause any more trouble than he's already caused. His crime, apparently, is claiming to be a king - a rival to the government and its law and order. It's sedition again. Treason. A crime against the state. Inside this prisoner is the Prince of Peace. Who would have thought it!

-ooOoo-

The first claim of this sermon is simply that prisoners are people. Often we talk about them as if they're all pretty much the same - made the same by some kind of common flaw - made the same by some kind of common judgment - made the same by donning the uniform of criminal mistake. But they not are numbered instances of criminal mistake; they are people.

The second claim is that sometimes, when someone ends up in prison, and the official narrative explains why that is just an OK outcome, there is sometimes another narrative. It can be a narrative about society making quick or lazy judgments. It can be a narrative about processes being insecure and unjust. It can be a narrative about the abuse of power. It can be a narrative of a society having gone off the rails in its formation of citizens. Where there are prisoners, there is always the question "are we doing something wrong?"

The third claim is a little stranger. It is that hiding within the prisoners we find Christ - God's speaking to us of broken humanity being loved and liberated - God's way of truth lived until a freedom comes and claims us - God's broken person awaiting resurrection. And according to the parable, as we begin to understand this, as we begin to perceive the presence of Christ in the broken and imprisoned ones, we ourselves have the opportunity to hear the words spoken: "Come, you that are blessed, inherit the kingdom prepared for you". In visiting the prisoner, in visiting the people of many **kinds of prisons**, the mystery of God's presence emerges, unfolds. Hiding inside the prisoner, an opportunity to be blessed by the coming close of God. Who would have thought it!

As also for the hungry, as also for the thirsty, as also for the stranger, as also for the naked, as also for the sick - the emerging, the unfolding, of the coming close of God.

"Lord, when did we see you?" Who would have thought it! We keep a moment of quiet.

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