

## Sermon Archive 178

Sunday 3 December, 2017

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Mark 13: 24-37

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Evening, midnight, cock crow, morning.

Can you imagine a little huddle of people, gathered maybe around a fire in a dark place. One of them is reading from a big old book - and they are hearing for the very first time a story about a man who's come from God. They don't know how it's going to end, but from the start it's been about the sharing of a secret - the secret (shhh!) that in this life, God has joined us. (I'll tell you a secret, but for now keep it quiet. A time is coming when it'll be made plain, and we all will see.)

As the pace of this never-before-heard story picks up, are the people around the fire "leaning into" that final seeing. Surely, as things are getting faster, a little bit more scary, like a crisis is on its way, surely soon the secret's going to blow. The world will see him, recognise him, embrace and celebrate him. The Master is coming. But, says Mark, you do not know when he will come - in the evening, at midnight, at cock crow, or in the morning. You'll have to wait and see. There is a pause . . .

Then the reader of the story picks up again. Having tantalized the others, he carries on the story. It is the story of the following evening, and midnight, and cock crow, and morning that Jesus will live. Like chapters near the end of the story, these times, moments of the day (foreshadowed in Jesus' strange imagery of the end), call us into the listening, the watching and the waiting. When will he arrive? Evening, midnight, cock crow, morning.

-ooOoo-

We're looking for the arrival of the master of the house, and it is evening. In the evening Jesus invites his disciples to join him at the table. They're going to break bread together and remember where they came from. They'll remember that great slave march out of Egypt, the early and scary days of their coming

back into freedom. They'll follow the old rituals of lifting up the cup, invoking the blessing of the God through whose goodness they have bread and wine and sharing to offer. And on this particular evening, they'll be invited to remember him. God knows why he wants them to remember him. He's right there with them - about to burst the secret. It's only the absent who need remembering - and there is no absence, only presence. This sacrament is confusing - but the master might be in it - maybe that's actually what he's saying.

Around the camp fire, as this story is read and heard for the first time, is this when the master of the house is going to arrive? Is this the definitive moment when we'll all see, and know that God is with us? Is this the great coming in power and glory? The listeners lean into the secret. There is a pause . . .

As the reader takes up the story again, and evening becomes a time behind us, no longer before us, no longer around us, we realise that in the evening, the master of the house was not perceived.

The story comes now to midnight. What happens at midnight? We are told that at the middle of the night disciples fall asleep. Their eyes become heavy, and despite their best intentions, they just need to sleep. So at midnight we the master experiences failed support. At midnight he feels lonely and vulnerable. At midnight he prays that things might be different, but knows deep within that they won't be. At midnight, fears are tested; limits are pressed. At midnight, disciples receive a prodding from God to stay awake - maybe a plea from God to last the distance. Could this be the moment, dear listeners around the fire, where the master will arrive? Is it in the confrontation of human beings to faith and nobility, that finally it'll happen - and we'll see him, greet him, know him, love him? Is this where the secret breaks and God arrives? There is a pause . . .

As the reader takes up the story again, and midnight becomes a time behind us, no longer before us, no longer around us, we realise that at midnight, the master of the house was not perceived.

The never before heard story brings us now to that time before the morning, when the early awakening parts of creation begin to stir. It's a time before the morning light, when it's still dark, and a rooster crows. It's a feathered fanfare - a clarion in the dark. Why would this sound make a grown man cry? Because Peter is weeping! Tears, realisation, disappointment, disbelief. Peter

is stabbed by his failure as the rooster cries at him like a judge in the night. Could this moment of absolute, sudden realisation be that moment when the master of house comes upon us? Is this where the secret breaks, and where with cries of “Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy”, our God arrives? There is a pause.

As the reader takes up the story again, and cock crow becomes a time behind us, no longer before us, no longer around us, we realise that at cock crow, the master of the house was not perceived.

What now, in the story, is left? Morning. He might be in the morning. This morning, as soon as it was morning, he was taken to appear before the chief priests, with the elders and scribes, and the whole council held a consultation. In the morning people of fear and ill will gather to work out what to do with this man of whom the secret has been whispered. We’ve not heard this story before. We don’t know what’s going to happen, but it had better start happening now, because now things are getting serious. We’re moving from the broken human things (sleeping and tears and resolve that wasn’t quite strong enough) into the tools of formal judgments. This is where things get formalised and move beyond the point of no return. As the machine of state, with its executing power, faces off God in the morning, surely the master has to arrive. We have to see him now. We have to witness him morphing into power and glory now. We have to hear the angels sweep across the sky, or the sun is going to fail, and the stars are going to fall. The master has to come now. Not later. Now. There is a pause . . .

As the reader takes up the story again, this is different, and difficult. We didn’t see him in the evening. We didn’t see him at midnight. We didn’t see him at cock crow. And now even the morning is now behind us. As this never before heard story continues, his words echo “you don’t know when”.

The irony is that God was revealed in the evening. God was revealed at midnight. God was revealed at cock crow, and God was present in the morning. God was revealed in them all - but we still didn’t feel like the master had come. What are we looking for? Have we let the life of Christ, which we have been told, fashion our searching for God? What are we looking for?

The first audience, for whom Mark wrote his gospel, his story of Jesus, were probably non-Jewish Christians in Rome. What were they looking for? They lived in a place and time of lurid persecution. Nero, the Emperor wielding all the power, was a violent sadist who hated Christians. Christians were covered in wax and set alight as Imperial garden torches. Christians were fed to wild animals. Christians were beheaded. Christians were crucified - not because they had done anything in particular, but just "because". And who's going to stop an emperor! Maybe an army? Maybe a military coup? Or maybe a God coming with power and glory! Maybe someone coming on the clouds, with angels in his train! Maybe One who can shake the powers of heaven. What are they looking for? As he writes his gospel, Mark wants to promise just that - and just that in just this generation. Power, resistance, victory now!

I guess even these days, if you ask persecuted people what they're looking for, in a god, they're going to echo those sorts of things. A god who comes, whether it be evening, midnight, cock crow or morning, with glory and power.

When that God seems not to be present, doing those works of glory and power, what do we do? Some give up. They fall asleep. And we with them. We fall asleep.

Some of us, though, break bread in the evening, and remember. Some of us keep midnight watches with those who are frightened. Some of us console those who weep at cock crow. Some of us stand with Christ in our neighbour, not against Christ in our neighbour, as Christ is condemned by the corrupt and fearful machine. I wonder if keeping those sorts of vigils is what Jesus meant by "keeping awake". Not giving up, not falling asleep, but seeking the presence we know has been revealed to us who cannot see. Perhaps "keeping awake" is how he says God actually is present in any hour. Though the passion is lived out in many lives, though absence seems realer than presence, the master of the house revealed among us. Maybe that's what he means.

So, people of God, we keep awake. We keep a moment of quiet.

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