

Sermon Archive 179

Sunday 10 December, 2017

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Mark 1: 1-8

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Court verdicts are public records, and funerals are public events, where what is said is public. So I feel I *can* tell the story I'm about to tell.

-ooOoo-

Ross [*not his real name] had been a congregational minister, and was part of a large group of congregational ministers who transferred into the Presbyterian Church in 1969. That cohort of ministers stayed tight for the rest of their ministries and lives. They valued their friendships and supported one another. Ross served in a number of Presbyterian parishes, his last one was in South Auckland, and he was there for about twelve years. He retired in good standing with the church in 1995 and was declared a minister emeritus.

Shortly after retirement it transpired that he had sexually abused a large number of young boys in his care. Ross did not confess - a victim came forward. After careful investigation, a prosecution was put, a conviction secured, and in 1998 Ross began a long sentence in Mount Eden prison. None of the members of the congregational cohort could bring themselves to visit him. They were appalled by what he had done, and they felt he'd brought shame on them - the group that the Presbyterians had welcomed. None of his family visited him either, because, as they acknowledged publically at his funeral, their own children were among the victims. I understand that the only person to visit Ross was a retired Presbyterian minister who lived on the North Shore, and sometimes came to my church in Takapuna.

For his own good reasons, which I can't recall just now, this minister asked me in 1999, if I would take on the task of visiting Ross. So this was one short year after Ross had gone to jail as a strong, physically fit person. I met him for the first time in the secure dementia unit up the road from St George's. He couldn't speak. He could dribble. His eyes were empty. He died shortly after.

Some of the congregational cohort, of quite conservative, fundamentalist leanings, declared the dementia to be God's judgment. I never saw it that way, but I guess I wasn't struggling to handle anger and disappointment the way they were. I did, however, find myself wondering about the debilitation of carrying guilt. Was the emptying of the eyes, the cessation of speech in this instance, what the body had done in response to feelings of guilt? Worn out by processing what we've done. Bearing the weight of something simply too heavy to carry? As far as I could see, Ross had simply lived with his guilt (what he had done), faded away over two short years, and ceased to be.

It was interesting to watch the community coping with Ross's guilt – seeing what resources they drew on. The community used the courts and the prisons. The community exercised its right to wash its hands. The community formulated its theology of punishment. The community turned up at the funeral to tell its story, to state its truth. I have never since heard such straight-shooting eulogies, nor seen a community find such catharsis. The community had all these things at their disposal, and they **used** them. Singing and speaking their disappointment and pain, they began the long journey to healing. Communities all need ways of dealing with guilt.

John the Baptist's community had **its** system for dealing with guilt. It was a temple-based system of "sin offerings". The offerings were made regularly - on the understanding that anyone could easily be making unintended, unnoticed sins at any time - So whether or not you had anything in particular that was worrying you, any commission or omission of which you were aware, you made the offering just in case. Fine, sifted flour or perfect animal on the altar covered every person before the God who sees all things - even the clumsy things of which we're not aware.

But then there were the things of which we **were** aware - the things that sit in our consciences, the things we turn over in our minds when we can't sleep. And the system had graduated offerings for each of these, depending on the seriousness of the sin. The offering depended on whether the sin was unintentional or wilful. It depended on whether it was committed under duress. It depended on whether you had sinned against people or God. And in the God category, it depended on whether you'd broken a commandment that was positive (thou shalt), or negative (thou shalt not). It also depended on whether the party you had sinned against had forgiven you. And it depended on whether it was on a list of sins that Moses particularly detested. All of this

was considered by the temple priests in coming up with the right sin offering.

Whatever offering the priest prescribed, each offering was to include repentance. If you weren't sorry, if you didn't own your regret, then the offering was irrelevant. Restitution was sometimes part of what was required. If you committed yourself to putting things right, then that was helpful. Also helpful for sins where restitution wasn't possible, was penitence - punishing yourself, generally with physical pain. If you couldn't make things better for someone else, then at least you could make things worse for yourself. There were all sorts of calculators for assigning the correct number of lashes a penitent should seek - up to a maximum of 39 for very strong, very sorry people. First Century Judaism provided a thorough system for dealing with guilt.

If the system had actually worked, I strongly doubt that huge numbers of people would have flocked out into the wilderness looking for an alternative. "John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." That one voice, crying about repentance, should attract people from all around Judea and all through Jerusalem, shows that their current guilt system isn't working. People still feel burdened. The light in the eyes is still going out. The people still aren't healed, and maybe the community still is angry.

I can't tell you whether what John offered worked any better than the temple offering. And if it did, I can't tell you why. I can suppose, that if it did, it's because John himself was dressed in penitential clothing - camel's hair and eating insects - not in the holy robes of the temple priests. Bring your sins to a fellow penitent. (I also am troubled by what I do / have done.) Maybe that was helpful to the people. Or maybe there was something powerful in the act of baptism - acting out the washing away of the dirt. Maybe immersing yourself is a more dramatic, articulate gesture than handing over some flour to someone else. I don't know. But I do know that, whether or not it was useful to the guilt-carrying people, John saw it as a mere precursor to another baptism altogether. The baptism to which John looks is brought by Jesus, and it's called baptism with the Holy Spirit.

At this point the little Pentecostal chained up inside the responsible

Presbyterian leaps to loose his chains! Thoughts about wind and flame, and speaking in many languages! Thoughts about Jesus breathing on his disciples and the birth of the Church! But that's not what Spirit means in Mark's gospel. The first thing the Spirit does in Mark's gospel is to say to Jesus "you are my beloved son". The Spirit expresses love, and gives identity. The Spirit affirms relationship - expresses family bond. The second thing the Spirit does, within just a few more verses, is drive Jesus out into another wilderness, where he's confronted by his own temptations - realising that he, like all the other real human beings around him, is capable of taking the wrong road. I am not "holier than thou". And the third thing the Spirit does in Mark's gospel, is to heal the sick, and to bring back into fellowship the isolated. The Spirit is restoring community to a punished people.

John says Jesus is coming to baptise us into that. And do you think if we were steeped in that, drowned in that, we might find a right and better way, for us and our whole community, of dealing with guilt? In that kind of restoring Spirit, might we find healing for what's been broken? If so, we might just pray the Advent prayer: "Amen, come Lord Jesus".

-ooOoo-

Ross is living with guilt. He ceases to speak. His eyes empty out. He fades away. The people are angry, scared and scarred - and hurt. They're doing the best they can with their verdicts and sentences and hand-washing. They find catharsis in speaking their truth - but they know it's not really working. "After me comes one who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptised you with water; but he . . ."

We await his coming. Amen! Come Lord Jesus!

The Knox Church website is at: <http://www.knoxchurch.co.nz.html> . Sermons are to be found under News / Sermons.