

Sermon Archive 181

Sunday 24 December, 2017

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Hebrews 13: 1-3, 5-6

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

Yes, it’s a fine sentiment, and I’d have been happy to follow it if I’d have had room. But it was a busy weekend and we were full. When I told him we were full, it was no big drama. Something in his face just sort of said “O well, we’ll try somewhere else”. It’s a first inconvenience, a simple matter of checking out the other place next door. Just a minor blip.

-ooOoo-

When I told him that we were full, he was polite, but you could tell he was getting a bit annoyed. I’m not sure how many places he’d tried already, but I could tell it must have been a few. What he’d expected to be a fairly simple matter of finding somewhere to stay was becoming “less than simple”. He was trying, though, not to make a big deal out of it- maybe so as not to stress his heavily pregnant wife. I think she was his wife. I could sort of tell that he was trying to spare her - to mask his growing concern.

-ooOoo-

When I turned him away, there was something in his eyes that looked like panic. They were saying “O God, this is really a problem. There may be no solution. What are we going to do? And what if she goes into labour?”

You could tell that a whole lot of “what if anxieties” were falling into his mind and kind of tripping him. “Are you *sure* there’s no room” he asks, “we’re really not choosy”. These are the words of someone conceding, settling for less, getting desperate. I really felt sorry for him, but I just didn’t have any room. He’ll have to try somewhere else.

-ooOoo-

When *I* turned him away, he just looked really sad. It’s like he knew by now that he was looking for something that genuinely didn’t exist. There’s something awful about seeing a man who knows he’s failed his wife. He says nothing with words, but volumes with his face, with his physical stance. He bends. There’s no vacancy, and I feel terrible about it. I’d love to show hospitality to this stranger, but I can’t. I’m not an evil, unkind person. I just don’t have the capacity.

Maybe like the beaches of Europe don’t have capacity for fleets of leaking boats. Maybe like the borders of Bangladesh don’t have capacity for fleeing Rohingyas. Maybe like the economy hasn’t had room for 295,000 impoverished children. We’re not evil, you know. We’d like to show hospitality to strangers, you know, but the inn, the world, the heart is full. He looks at me with his deep, disappointed sorrow.

For goodness sake! Could he cope with a stable? Is it insulting to offer a human being an animal shelter? Well, if he *is* insulted, he doesn’t show it. A stable’s better than nothing. He grasps my offer - tells me I’m an angel! (Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.)

I take them round the back, and we start looking at how they can

manage on what's there. They're going to have to be resourceful. But there's hay to sleep on, and a bit of animal body heat for warmth. Materially, they'll be OK. Maybe the greater challenge for them will be attending to wounds they've suffered to the **spirit** - dealing with that lingering feeling that they aren't very important. And his feeling that he's put her through difficulty and indignity - having to beg for help. I'm not sure how you attend to those sorts of things. But maybe that's for tomorrow. For tonight they just need to sleep, so I step away. They'll be OK.

If I were to check in on them later, I would discover that her time had come - she'd given birth to her child. And I'd see that "making do for the child" has been ripping up strips of cloth to swaddle him in, and turning a feeding trough into a makeshift crib. They're certainly adaptable. I guess you can be if you have to be. They've embraced a very small expression of hospitality and made it into a cradle for new life. Heaven's surrogates make an inventive nativity!

As I look at this scene, I feel like I'm seeing something that not only is brave, but also is beautiful, tender. I want to say I am seeing "something holy". It is as if **God** has become present in this space - like an angel has arrived. *(Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.)* I know that the child born that night will grow into someone who will make room for others. I know he'll assure people, by the way he lives his life, that God's love is spacious, that it has arms opened wide in welcome. He will show the world that heaven's house is big enough for all. He won't be turning people away.

-ooOoo-

God, teach us to welcome those who need room. In our “no vacancy” world, teach us to find space for others. Teach us, when confronted by all that we do not have, and cannot offer, to be creative, to remember that we **do** have a stable out the back. Teach us what to do with the leaky boat and the crowded borders. Teach us what to do with the people whose names we dare not say. Teach us what to do with the children the economy doesn’t accommodate. Teach us - that we might see you being born not into indifference, but into compassion. Born not into rejection, but into welcome. Born not into disparagement, but into dignity and joy.

Ha, by offering hospitality some people have found themselves entertaining angels! For a stable in Bethlehem, for a child in a manger, for the coming to the world of God’s embrace, thanks be to God.

We keep a moment of quiet.

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