

Sermon Archive 186

Sunday 4 February, 2018

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: 1 Corinthians 1: 26-31

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



I approve of the tradition of the President of the United States delivering an annual State of the Union address. It's good that the people should be able to hear their elected Head of State describe the achievements of the just-completed year. In listening to what is presented as achievement, the people have a chance to evaluate the direction they're taking. It gives them an opportunity to listen beneath the presented achievements, for values - for expressions from their leader of what is good, important, valuable to their society. And in listening to **how** it is presented, they can determine, by feel, intuition, whether they're hearing genuine achievement or shallow boasting. Does the President's speech feel like a "being accountable", or a "self-justification"?

I note that this year's State of the Union speech caused a number of elected officials to start chanting "USA, USA". I understand that this was the first time that chant was chanted in that chamber - more normally being heard at sports events when significant portions of the crowd have been drinking.

Anyway, having spent some time this week with Paul's letter to the Corinthians, in which he writes about God choosing what is **weak** in the world **to shame** the **strong**, the following part of the President's speech caught my attention. The President said:

Around the world, we face rogue regimes, terrorist groups, and rivals like China and Russia that challenge our interests, our economy, and our values. In confronting these dangers, we know that weakness is the surest path to conflict, and unmatched power is the surest means of our defence.

For this reason, I am asking the Congress to end the dangerous defence sequester and fully fund our great military.

As part of our defence, we must modernize and rebuild our nuclear arsenal, hopefully never having to use it, but making it so strong and powerful that it will deter any acts of aggression. Perhaps someday in the future there will be a magical moment when the countries of the world will get together to eliminate their nuclear weapons. Unfortunately, we are not there yet.

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In classical reformed theology, the question was put: “what is God *like*?” How do you describe the nature of God? Answers to the question often followed a process of projecting deeply-held values onto God - taking characteristics that we admire in humans, amplifying them hugely, then attributing them to heaven. An example! Knowledge is good. We admire people who know things. Let’s amplify that by infinity - from “knowing” to “*all* knowing”. Sentience to *omniscience*. God knows all. Around that attribute, then, we developed theories about God not only fully knowing the past and the present, but God already fully knowing the future. That kind of tripped us up. If God knew the future, did that mean that the future was already determined? Is everything actually fixed? Have we no power to change the future? That got us tangled up in all sorts of complications about free will, determinism, and predestination. We gave centuries of thought to those questions, while the poor stayed poor and we were distracted.

Another example. Power is good; we admire the powerful. So let’s multiply power by infinity, and come up with omnipotence - God all-powerful. The trouble with that was that if God was all powerful, if God could do anything, then why wouldn’t God heal a child of her cancer? Calling it “the problem of pain”, we allowed ourselves to ponder whether suffering meant that God had turned into a depraved, sadistic bastard. Some of us decided to defend God’s honour on that one, positing that the sick child’s suffering must have been a just punishment for some kind of sin. So we blamed the victim, praised our God, and brought ourselves no credit at all.

Another example. Particularly in times of tumult and change, we began to appreciate constancy. Change frightened us, dependability comforted us; we elevated the worth of tradition - things that stayed the same. God, the immutable, God the changeless. We sang songs to that God:

*Swift to its close ebbs out life’s little day;
earth’s joys grow dim, its glories pass away;
change and decay in all around I see:
O thou who changest not, abide with me.*

Under the influence of that God, we wondered why our faith lost its prophetic edge, its desire to reform, its commitment to wrestle justice out of unjust status quos. We wondered why much of the church’s time was given to looking backwards, pronouncing benedictions on things from which the progressives of the world largely had moved on. In times of newness and discovery, times of progress, why did the church have such a small and frightened voice?

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Answering the question “what is God like?” we did a lot of projecting of values. We threw up to “heaven” a lot of our ultimate concerns. And so often it resulted in a life for the church that was deeply disappointing. Riven with philosophically time-wasting corollaries, with objectionable ethics, with a focus on all the wrong sorts of things, our theology felt like it was bringing us shame.

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Paul had given quite some thought to the things that his society valued. They valued knowledge, wisdom. They valued power. They valued noble status - standing in the community. Putting those virtues “out there”, Paul then gently noted, for his friends in Corinth, that not many of them possessed them. Not many of them were wise. Not many were powerful. Not many were noble or strong. None of them, by human standards, had anything much about which to boast. But, for Paul, that really didn’t matter, because power and knowledge and high social standing had nothing to do with how God had addressed the world. God had addressed the world in Jesus. Looking at the nature of Jesus, being moulded by the humility of Jesus, taking on the lowly likeness of Jesus, is the way we answer the question “what is God like?”

You see, the problem with projecting our values onto a god in heaven, is that we can project anything we like. And if there is no questioning of the values that we project, no spiritually responsible critique of what we project, then our god might indeed become a creature who says:

weakness is the surest path to conflict; unmatched power is the surest means of our defence . . . As part of our defence, we must modernize and rebuild our nuclear arsenal.

Paul’s suggestion is that **that** claim be placed next to another claim: “that God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.”

Put those two claims together, says Paul; put commitment to reinforcing a nuclear arsenal next to God’s working through the love and worldly weakness of Christ - and see whether and where there grows a sense of shame. Put them together and see whether there is a feeling of creative redemption, or simply a sense of boasting. Stick it next to Jesus, and see how it feels.

The United States was not the only country this week to have received a state of the nation speech. Here at home, we had our rather less theatrical speeches. The

Prime minister outlined her targets for the reduction of child poverty. She observed that if she even partially achieved the targets, her government would have achieved more than any other New Zealand government in history. She also opened the Pike River Re-entry office in Greymouth, saying that, after years of inertia and underachievement, real progress was now a possibility. In setting forth her goals, and in critiquing the status quo, she was expressing values, and maybe doing some provisional boasting.

The Leader of the Opposition responded with his expression of values - and some oppositional political boasting. He observed that his government had made progress with child poverty reduction, and that the only reason further reduction was a possibility was that he'd managed the economy well. Then critiquing the current government's values, he described recent policy developments as being driven by "a nostalgic belief in trees, trains and trade unions".

In the "to and fro" of achieving, of boasting, of competing value statements, from where will we find our tools of responsible critique? Paul's suggestion is that we put the competing claims next to what has been seen in Jesus - and wait and see where the shame grows. Put the political claims next to Jesus. Interestingly, Paul says this at the end of a week during which some of Jesus' own people put on quite a strange display about their Lord's name having been dropped from parliament's prayer. "Bring back Jesus", they sang, chanted, prayed. I feel a very strange bedfellow of those protesters; but I can't help but feel that reflecting on the nature of Christ *is* a gift to those engaged with shepherding values through politics. Put Jesus next to it, and see where the shame forms.

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Around the world, we face rogue regimes, terrorist groups, and rivals that challenge our interests and our values. In confronting these opportunities for deep reflection and development, we know that weakness is God's curious chosen path, and that unmatched power is the surest means of our defeat. Reflecting on Christ, feeling for the shame, boasting only in God.

We keep a moment of quiet.

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