

Sermon Archive 187

Sunday 11 February, 2018

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Mark 9: 2-9

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Three stories about interviews, conversations and experiences, then a transfiguration story, then some thoughts.

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A while back, Radio New Zealand's National programme broadcast an interview that Jesse Mulligan conducted with David Benatar, a philosopher at Cape Town University. David has become famous lately for his anti-natalist claims. David has argued that human being should stop having children, because life is awful and it's wrong to inflict awfulness on children. One of his books is called "Better never to have been" - and the title captures his position well. Pain is much more common than pleasure. Any characteristic of human life that we admire is actually present in life only in tiny doses. Any of the things that we normally hold up as giving life meaning, end up ceasing in death.

Jesse struggles to appreciate David's position. He mentions that that morning he'd spent time with his children, had a nice cup of coffee. Later on in the day he plans to go for a bike ride around the city. Life doesn't seem all that bad or meaningless to him.

David responds like this:

I don't think that life is utterly meaningless. I think that there's no meaning from the cosmic perspective. So if you look at that very broad view and ask "is there a purpose to human life", I don't think there is. But I don't think it follows from that that individual lives can't have some form of terrestrial meaning. And there I do think we derive meaning from our relationships with other people, most obviously family, but also friends, from our contributions to the community, perhaps to humanity at large. And I don't for one moment think that those things are unimportant. I think once we are here, it's much better to lead a meaningful life - insofar as it can be meaningful - than to think that because nothing matters from the cosmic perspective that it also doesn't matter from the terrestrial perspective.

After a little further reflection on how the terrestrial experience is so oriented towards pain and death, and how we'd all have been better not to have been, Jesse asks David whether this is true not just for human beings, but for horses, cats, giraffes? "Don't have kids; it's not worth it?"

David replies: *yes, I think that this point applies to all sentient life, because all sentient life is capable of suffering, of experiencing unpleasantness.*

Listening to the interview, I find myself considering David's ideal world - which seems to be one in which there are no sentient beings. Nothing is being experienced. Things just are. And considering David's *non-ideal* world, the world that is, I wonder that he can look at it, and see only the bad, the potential for pain, the insignificance. And I find myself wanting to pray a little prayer for the world.

-ooOoo-

Shyheel is a quiet young man who works on the checkouts at the Countdown supermarket at Avonhead. He rarely says "boo". Among my items to be purchased this day was a bottle of wine - which of course needed to be released by the supervisor. The supervisor was the gregarious Ben, with whom I've had frequent spirited conversations. I noted that Ben had had a haircut. Ben and I exchanged some banter about haircuts as Shameel quietly finished scanning my other items.

On a subsequent visit to Countdown, Avonhead, Shyheel once again rang the bell to call the supervisor to deal with another age-restricted item. Along came Ben, authorised the purchase, and noted that I now had a flash new haircut. More fun-poking ensued, chatter about the burdens of being particularly good looking - happy chatting while Shyheel finished off scanning the groceries.

This week I'm back at the supermarket. There are no age-restricted items in my basket, so there's no need for Shyheel to ring the bell. I look at him and see that he too has had a haircut. "You've joined the club and had a haircut" I say. He replies "Yes, I got it for my graduation." He explains he's just completed a diploma in business studies. He looks so proud! I **see** him. I see intelligence and hard work. I see goals set and won. I see a young man who is on his way. I see him smiling, coming out of himself, as I offer him congratulations.

-ooOoo-

When I was thirteen years old, I was swinging from monkey bars, as you do.

Coming from the other end of the monkey bars was Andrew Madsen. The idea of the game was to hold on to the bars, not let go, while dislodging your opponent, causing him to fall to the ground below. Good fun! Here comes Andrew; there goes Matthew. Who will win? Andrew and Matthew both fall to the ground. I think, technically and only by a nose, I probably lost, since I hit the ground just before Andrew landed on my ankle. I can still make clicking noises with that ankle the way I can't with my other one. Because I was in pain, and because I couldn't walk, Mum was called to pick me up and take me away. She'd been at work, and had to go back to work, so she took me with her. This is the woman who cleaned the house I lived in. This is the woman who cooked me food. This is the woman I knew best of all women - just my mum. Mum's work place, to which I was taken, was the Panmure X-ray rooms, where she was a radiographer. Since I was in need of an X-ray, Mum just got on with it. She took me into one of the exam rooms, set me on the table, positioned my leg, told me what would happen next, went behind a screen - from which she operated this huge rig of a machine, with its crane-like pulleys and cables stretching across the ceiling. She made the machine go hum and click. She took the X-ray. I remember thinking "wow, did she just do that? I knew that she was a radiographer, but I didn't really appreciate what that meant. Out of the blue I had seen not just Mum, but a competent, professional medical technician. I saw someone operating sophisticated nuclear machinery. I saw someone using skills that revealed specialised training. I **saw** her.

-ooOoo-

It's a strange story, isn't it? Peter, James and John walking along with Jesus, when suddenly he's bathed in light, surrounded by giants from history, shining with glory. It's overwhelming, frightening, amazing - and then it's gone. They're left with a feeling that they have seen something they're not to talk about, but that they mustn't ever forget. They're left with a conviction that Jesus is precious and they need to listen to him. They have seen something that calls them to listen more carefully - to listen for echoes of the glory of God.

Seeing something in Jesus - something hitherto unrevealed, something unnoticed. And through that, being called back down the mountain to listen more carefully - to understand more fully what we see, to take on a life of listening for the echoes of God.

Let's take a look again. David, the philosopher, sees the world that is. He sees

some pleasure, but mostly he sees the pain. He sees love, but just as a prelude to loss. He sees children, but only as pawns in a game of suffering. He sees sentient life, dreams of a day when there will be none. "Better never to have been." Do we believe in a God who reveals the significance and beauty of things? How might we listen more deeply for echoes of that God? When a culture of defeat is being constructed, when a commitment to negativity is being presented to us, how do we speak for the One who opens up the good, the love, the pride?

Let's take a look again. Shyheel works at the checkout, and for years I've just not seen him. He's a cog in a supermarket machine. He's a functionary. He's not the other one to whom I give my regular conversation. He's quiet. It's a world in which people walk past one another, don't notice one another, don't *see* one another. Do we believe in a God who reveals the significance and beauty of a person? How might we listen more deeply for echoes of that God in our sharing of life?

Let's take a look again. Mum cleans the house and makes the sandwiches. She's loved by her family, the people who know her best. And yet even they missed seeing certain of her skills. Half-understood. Parts of life and experience not really apprehended. Maybe familiarity breeds contempt - leaving the people we know the best, not receiving our deepest appreciation. Being fuller people than we are taken for, and knowing it ever will be so. Do we believe in a God who reveals the significance and beauty of a person? Do we believe that Peter, James and John are enabled to see their beloved as God's beloved too? A person of deep, abiding significance? How might we listen more carefully for that kind of God?

I ask these questions as if they can be answered with words. Maybe they can be. Or maybe the answering is something that needs to be lived - some walk that needs to be taken - some prayer for wisdom or insight that needs to be prayed. Maybe the answering comes in the form of remembering, with gratitude, conversations in supermarkets, discoveries made in X-ray rooms. Maybe the answering comes in the form of parents saying "no" to gloom and "yes" to future generations.

Radio New Zealand's National programme broadcast an interview that Jesse Mulligan conducted with David Benatar. We listen, deeply, for echoes of the One who reveals love and beauty. We keep a moment of quiet.

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