

Sermon Archive 190

Sunday 4 March, 2018

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: John 2: 13-22

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



On Wednesday, I attended a meeting of four Catholics, two Methodists and a couple of Presbyterians. We came together to begin talking about whether Christchurch needs some forum for Christians to think deeply together about their faith. “Deep thought” became a bit of a common theme in the conversation as each person there spoke about a lack of it in their denomination. The Methodists lamented an alleged “dumbing down” of the training its ministers in formation received. Catholics reported conversations with parish priests that were depressing in their banal circularity borne of priestly fear of listening and learning. One of the Presbyterians declared it had been about twenty years since he’d found a Presbyterian minister reading a book. Good quality, theologically-engaged, critical-minded conversation was being missed all over the Church. One person piped up that it was a bit of a mystery, given the great riches of the Church’s theological tradition.

At this point, someone else issued a bit of a caution. “You’ve got to be careful”, he said, “about that Christian tradition. I know of so many people”, he said, “who are sincerely searching for something spiritual, something nourishing or challenging, but who don’t want a bar of dogma or doctrinal baggage. They don’t want to be told what they must believe. They don’t want to be buried under a great weight of (shall we sexistly say) *man*-made stuff, church-speak, institutional detritus. That kind of stuff is perfect for chasing away good-will and engagement.

Since Wednesday I’ve carried on thinking about this. I think it’s wrong to dismiss everything from the Christian tradition just because it’s been formed through a process of human thinking. We are human beings, and our thinking is human, and what we make together (in terms of our intellectual harvest) is human - just as our painting, composing, singing, dancing, poem-

making is human. Being human-made isn't necessarily a guarantee of worthlessness. I don't think that anyone who considers God becoming human in Nazareth, could seriously dismiss the worth of human endeavour. Sloppily equating human-made with spiritually irrelevant is more than a tiny bit arrogant, and unhelpfully anti-intellectual.

AND YET! And yet; and yet the Christian tradition does have a penchant for producing human things but then insisting that they're sprung straight from the hand or heart of God. Sometimes it's done subtly, by declaring the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Yes, it appeared to come into being through human authorship, but it's really the work of the Spirit. What makes Western Christianity orthodox, but Eastern Christianity heretical? The Spirit speaking in Latin through the creeds of Nicaea. What makes an Anglican? The Spirit giving thirty nine articles in an English accent. What makes a Presbyterian? The Spirit's Larger Catechism in a Scottish burr. These obviously human-created works, attributed to divine work, typically come into being to draw people in, and to lock people out, to sort authentic believers from pasty pretenders - inspired, purportedly, by the Spirit. God product. Divine. Essential.

Once upon a time our denomination sought to be wise and sensitive about the distinction between human-made and Godly-origin. We operated a principal of liberty of conscience on matters not central to the Reformed Faith. It was an acknowledgement that some church things were just church things, not God things - and oughtn't to become the focus of endless argument, we said. People ought to have liberty of conscience on non-essential matters. People certainly ought not to be cut adrift from the Church over human-made things. In recent times, our Church decided that liberty of conscience should no longer apply to the matter of marriage. Uniformity of belief on marriage was now a Presbyterian essential. As it became an essential, some people were put beyond the care and community of our denomination.

While I was distressed by this, I shouldn't have been surprised. The church does, as I have said, have a penchant for, and a long, repeating history of, declaring "divine and essential" things made by human hands.

On Wednesday, by the end of the meeting, we human beings, from our

various cross-denominational positions, ended up saying that maybe what we needed to do, was bring our brains (and the Methodists also wanted to bring their hearts) to talk together simply and inclusively about the life and teaching of Jesus. Leave to one side, for the moment, the weight of the creeds, catechisms and articles, and explore the life and teaching of Jesus.

-ooOoo-

A few comments about the temple in Jerusalem and its history. It's interesting to note that the first time any mention is made of a temple, it's suggested by a human being in conversation with God. It's the human being who floats the idea. "God, I would like to build you a temple. You need a temple. You'd look good in a temple."

God says "no, I don't see myself in a temple. A tent's been fine - flexible, moveable, more in keeping with my journeying vibe. A temple's just not 'me'."

One generation later, and another human being declares, perhaps more persistently, that God needs a temple. And this time it gets built. It then gets destroyed - but built again. The human beings give repeated effort to making sure there's a temple. And much of Israel's religious life gets oriented around it. Focus. Pride. Ritual. A special priesthood. Offerings. Orientation of identity and culture. People of the temple - made by human hands out of solid, heavy materials.

Fast forward to the time of Jesus, where we explore the temple's design. In the middle of the temple, you have a place only for priests. It's called the "holy of holies", and that's where the priestly activities go on. Outside the "holy of holies" you have a courtyard for the people of Israel - the people to whose ancestors God made the covenant promise. The favoured people, the significant people, the relevant people. Beyond that, you had the Gentiles court, for everyone else - just because it's accepted that, by some outside chance, God might be of interest to the non-favoured people, the insignificant people, the irrelevant people who don't belong inside. And it is **this** court, for the **outsiders**, that the priests and chosen people have allowed to become cluttered with commerce -

money, animals, noise.

People suggest, when Jesus gets angry, that zeal for God's house has consumed him. I wonder whether the zeal might not have been for the house, so much as it was for the undervalued people. I wonder whether Jesus' outrage might not have been about the disrespecting of the space that was meant to be a gift to those on the outside - people wanting to engage with the holy, but squeezed out of the opportunity. Or maybe, I should just go with the weight of history and its obsession with, solid, heavy, human-made things. Yes, of course Jesus was concerned about the human-built temple. Not the people there - who were made by God.

Made by human hands. Made by God. Lines dividing. Areas of common-ground. Essential and irrelevant. In and out. Perspective. Focus. In a temple initially resisted by God, in a temple now a national focus, in a temple now excluding a whole sector of people made by God, excluded for pure economic convenience of the "in" people, Jesus' anger calls a halt.

He then speaks of another temple. It is the temple of a human being, made by God, through whom God is calling into conversation the resurrection imagination of the people. Not the weight of culture and history. Not the beautiful but now distorted work of human builders. But a human engagement with One who feels like "God with us". Zeal for the house abates, and Jesus sketches another kind of temple - God among us, making space for us, stretching our thinking, dying and coming again. So bring your brain, and (if you are a Methodist sympathiser) bring your heart. Bring them to the life (and teaching, I suppose) of Jesus. At his table, take bread and wine made by human hands, but receive instead something made by God. God with us, among us, a temple not made by human hands.

-ooOoo-

I went to a meeting on Wednesday. People of different theological traditions, of many dogmas and doctrines, came together. Eventually they articulated a desire to find something nurturing, something deep that felt like God. As we continue our Lenten journey, Jesus clears out the temple, opens up the way. We keep a moment of quiet.

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