

Sermon Archive 191

Sunday 11 March 2018

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: Psalm 107: 1-3, 17-22
Ephesians 2: 1-10

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Two readings: each telling a story of rescue. The psalm remembers a people who'd lost their way, and on the way to losing their way, drawing close to the gates of death. The passage from Ephesians has another people described as already being dead, overwhelmed, buried in their pursuit of all the wrong things. It's killing them.

By some kind of miracle, both peoples are met along the road by something that can only be called "kindness", and are saved. The Ephesian people come away, raised up and feeling like they are God's own poems - - the Greek word used, describing us as God's work, is "poiehma" - a poem - something beautiful, playful, creative. The *psalm* people come away, offering thanksgiving sacrifices and singing a song of joy.

Dying, finding kindness, being rescued, making poems, singing for joy.

-ooOoo-

Hello human being. I found you sitting in our car park on Saturday evening. Normally I'd have avoided eye contact and scurried past. You had a defeated kind of look on your face, and that's always complicated. I'm not sure why I talked to you. I know that I'd come to the car park from the supermarket where I'd bought some baps to use as filled rolls for the parish picnic the next day. It was annoying I had to buy six baps when I really only needed two. So anyway I asked you if you were hungry. You told me you weren't, but that you could really use an AA meeting. I was pretty sure we didn't have one on a Saturday night, but I'd check the AA website out on my computer. It'll take a couple of minutes, I said, as I went off, six baps still in hand, to check for a meeting. The computer confirmed that we didn't have one here at Knox, but there was one up the road at St Barnabas, Fendalton. I had to be back at

Knox by 7:30pm (to meet a film crew, you know!), but I could take you quickly to Fendalton if we went right now.

On the way to Fendalton you told me your story. Service in the Australian Defence Force. Traumatic loss of people under your command. A family that did care, but didn't really know what to do for you. Drifting a bit since discharge. Lots of alcohol. And now, with you right next to me in the closed confines of a car, I can smell it. When we arrive at St Barnabas, you want to give me \$10.00, because you really appreciate my help. I say I don't need \$10.00. I'm just happy to have helped someone get to an AA meeting, since a number of people I've known have found AA to be their salvation. You try a few more times to give me money, and I manage not to accept it. Finally you take a plastic cider bottle out of your bag, take several huge swigs of what now is in it in readiness for your meeting. You shake my hand, tell me that your name is "Matt" - we have something in common. (There, but by the grace of God . . .) As I drive off, I find myself saying "Goodbye human being. On your road, may you be met by kindness".

-ooOoo-

Hello human being. I didn't find you in a car park. I've read about you. I've heard about you on the radio. Statistically, you could be male or female - it seems that either is equally likely. Also statistically, if you're not in the age group of 16-24 (where there's quite a noticeable peak), you're likely to be elderly. You are the lonely. And the experts now are describing loneliness as an epidemic. Otago University says that 20% of elderly people are seriously lonely. A study in the United Kingdom showed that roughly 10% of elderly people visit their local doctor motivated by loneliness, rather than by any actual physical illness. People are just seeking out contact. Interviewed by a Stuff journalist, a 54 year old Kiwi prostitute called "Ann" said that about half of her clients weren't interested in having sex. They wanted cuddles. They wanted to talk. Age Concern, Tauranga, has recently said it can no longer take referrals to visit older, lonely people in Te Puke, Katikati and Omokoroa, because their 100 strong team of volunteers is already fully committed with its visiting schedule in Tauranga. Loneliness is just that common. And it's destructive. They say it's now as serious a factor in illness and early death, as high blood pressure, obesity and smoking. It's a common factor in the stories of those who go on to develop cognitive

decline and dementia. Loneliness is killing us. What did the psalm say? They drew near to the gates of death - things that make us dead.

So hello human being. I think I saw you at the supermarket the other day. You had only a few items in your shopping basket - and nothing that looked like it might have warranted an urgent trip to the shops. You were talking to the person on the checkout, and the person was listening to you, and smiling. I suppose he could have been hurrying you through, to deal with the line of people behind you. But he wasn't. He was listening and smiling. As you leave the supermarket, I find myself thinking "goodbye human being. On your road, may you be met by kindness".

-ooOoo-

Hello human being. I met you on a very crowded train in Europe. I can't remember the origin or destination of the train, but you came from America. I noticed you because you were engaged in a very loud argument with someone over a seat - a seat over which you seemed to feel some kind of entitlement. It struck me as strange, since I think it was a general admission carriage. No one was any more entitled to a seat than anyone else. It seemed to me that you were no longer talking to the person in the seat, but to everyone else in the carriage - and that you were trying to enlist the support of others to shame the other person out of the seat. The louder you became, the sorrier I became for the person you were trying to shame. I remember looking at you, and suddenly getting a sense of your being dressed for battle - like you were looking at me from within a sort of suit of armour. Your hair was heavily hair-sprayed. You had giant artificial eyelashes, and heaps of eye shadow. Your face was powdered - and it made you almost look encased in artifice - trapped within an assertion that was making itself, about itself, for itself. It was almost as if the humanity had somehow been trapped. I found myself wondering how you had got there. What sort of experience, what kind of culture, what mouldings of self, had made you the rudest person on the train? Well maybe you'd been brought up by selfish parents. Maybe your times were pervaded by a cult of individualism. Maybe all your friends were greedy. Maybe the conversations within which you learned to converse were all arguments or shouting. Maybe you were raised on the milk of taking, rather than the food of giving. I don't know. I just remember looking at

you and thinking about all the awful things that seemed to have formed a kind of shell around you - a heavy shell, an isolating shell, a poisonous shell - in which you lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the thing that is at work among the disobedient, among the children of wrath, the children of anger. You did look trapped. You did seem to need a liberating. As I now, in my imagination, get off that train again, I find myself thinking "I don't like what you have become, but I can't help but feel that the only way out, is for you to be transformed by kindness. Didn't someone once say "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." Kindness. Kindness. So goodbye human being. On your road, may you be met by kindness".

-ooOoo-

Hello human being. You look OK in the frame of that mirror. Looking in that mirror, do you sometimes wonder who you are? Are you are rememberer of traumas, departed friends and hangovers? Are you lonely? Are you sometimes, if not the loudest person on the train, perhaps carrying all sorts of distortions and battle-axes from your world-view? Probably you do see some of that in the mirror, because as it's said "all of us once lived like that". Yet it is also said that grace has found us - kindness has met us. It is said that we are God's poems, God's songs, created for goodness and joy, created not for death, but fullness of life.

So to you, human being, I say give yourself to kindness. Be kindness. Serve kindness. Befriend kindness. Sing kindness. Be God's poem of kindness.

Our Lenten journey continues. Along the way we will see much of sickness, loneliness and perishing of the soul. But along this road also travels God's kindness.

They cried out to the Lord in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress. He sent out his word and healed them, and delivered them from destruction. Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his calling them to Easter. Let them offer thanksgiving sacrifices, and tell of his deeds with songs of joy.

A moment of gratitude.

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