

Sermon Archive 196

Sunday 8 April, 2018

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: Acts 4: 32-35
1 John 1:1 – 2:2

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Before the sermon proper, two matters not covered in today's readings.

There once was a fig tree. I don't know whether it had a lovely shape or not, whether it was well established or just getting settled. I do know, though, that it was a living thing. It took in the carbon dioxide, put out the oxygen. On sunny days, it would have cast a shadow on the ground, maybe given shelter to a number of God's smaller creatures. For some reason I don't understand, it wasn't producing fruit. Maybe it wasn't the season. Maybe something was lacking in the soil. No, I don't know. But there it was, growing in the ground, being a tree.

One day someone passed by it, fancying a fig. Disappointed at not finding one, he cursed the tree - and it died. [Matthew 21:18-19]

Is that not Jesus at close to his most unattractive?

Secondly: Ananias and Sapphira belonged to a community that had decided to share everything - not just its harvest of figs, but its land, its housing, its money. For some reason I don't know, Ananias and Sapphira decided to share only part of what they had - not all. [Acts 5: 1-11] Was it insecurity? Past experience of want? Was it greed? I don't know. But in response to their holding back part of their harvest, Peter, famous friend of Jesus, challenged them; he accused them of lying to God. Right then and there, at Peter's word, they fell down dead.

Is that not an echo, in the cursing action of Peter, of Jesus at his most unattractive? A withholding tree dies at the cursing of Jesus. Two withholding people die at the cursing of the Jesus community.

Just as well neither of those episodes are part of today's reading! Let's ignore them, and get on with the sermon.

-ooOoo-

“We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands - concerning the word of life”. They had seen Jesus, full of God’s light, shining in the darkness, bringing light and life to all around him. They had seen grace. They had seen the sharing of life. They had seen mercy. They had seen love.

And having seen these things, they committed themselves to a certain way of life. No one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. There was not a needy person among them!

Can you imagine a New Zealand where there was not a single person in need? One by one, the foodbanks closed down, because no one needed them anymore. And all the people who used to volunteer at them took the day off to picnic at Hagley Park. Age Concern no longer had to visit the lonely, because bonds of friendship had unfurled like green-spreading koru, and enfolded the isolated. Every single child in the community had shoes, a raincoat to wear to school, a good breakfast in the belly. And all the mould and asbestos in the hospital buildings were simply stories from the past, from before we really worked out how to live together. No need. No want. No poverty - because now we’ve learned how to live in the Spirit of Jesus. His light shining. His generosity giving. His love ascending. His city forming. His resurrection giving shape to a new society - a new way of living. Selling what you have, and sharing everything with everyone.

Could it work? Is it something to which we should aspire?

No; don’t think so. Some people tried it, not just once, but a number of times. It was called “communism”. And while it looked OK on paper, in practice it always failed. Chairman Mao presided over the death by starvation of millions of people. Josef Stalin operated a state machine in which millions simply disappeared - last seen heading to the salt mines. Driven by Marxist ideology, Pol Pot in Cambodia caused the death of about a quarter of the population. Execution, strenuous work conditions, poor health care, malnutrition, invasion. And North Korea - paranoia, poverty, propaganda. Beyond the political rhetoric, nothing really gets shared – except fear and corruption. Political history says “no” to radical sharing.

Also saying “no”, closer to home, more a part of our political culture and experience, is the dialogue around social development. Using the language of what is “good for people”, we make the point that it’s not good for people constantly just to be given things. Do you remember the public commentary when a hoping-to-be-elected Labour party floated the idea of one year of free

tertiary education? The point was made that a free education would not be valued by people. If it was free, then no one would work hard. Worse still, some people might take to studying fluffy things like history, philosophy or theology. And as for social *welfare*, the “hand *up*” always degenerates into the “hand *out*” - sharing almost automatically morphs into dependency. The best thing you can do for people is to stress test them - force them to find internal resources, to stand on their own two feet. After all God, Godself, had said it in the garden: “it is by the sweat of your brow that you shall live”. [Genesis 3:19] Stand up and be a man! Take responsibility! Let the stress of the market develop the character of the person!

Also saying “no”, not from the realm of political theory, nor in the realm of economic responsibility, some basic tenets about human nature. Radical sharing is never going to work, because human beings are basically just hungry animals. We want a *big* portion. When we’re feeling peckish, we want to be able to take a fig from the tree. And if we can’t have what we want, we take on the language of cursing (even the best of us takes on the language of cursing). You can have all the right structures, all the right expectations; you can even have laws requiring everyone to contribute to society. But because we’re human beings, up through the ranks comes a leader saying “I haven’t paid tax for years - that makes me smart!” Radical sharing’s never going to work, because human beings are greedy. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. Ananias and Sapphira, whom we decided earlier we would ignore, cannot be ignored. They will always be part of the picture - showing that common ownership, that common wealth, that radical sharing, is impractical, naïve, never going to happen. Political experience, economic modelling, deep beliefs about human nature all conspire to say “no”.

And yet . . .

In churches all around the world, today, people will be giving their money away. Offering bags and plates will be passed around, and people will put money in, not take it out. And in Christian communities, all around the world, today, people will give of their valuable time - for the benefit of others. Though they’ll be aware of communist case study failures, and though they’ll harbour ideas about fiscal responsibility, though they’ll be pretty realistic about human nature, they will, at least in the quiet way of making an offering of money or time, having a crack at sharing the wealth. Fools! It’s never going to work. I wonder why they bother. What are they thinking?

What *are* they thinking?

We are **told** what the brand new Christian community was thinking. It was thinking about the resurrection - a miracle of God, by which Love spoke to Death until there was Life. These people were thinking about God sharing breath and light and movement with the body of a dead Galilean. These people were thinking about love and favour refusing to let go. That's what we're told was in their thinking. That's what seemed to have enabled them to become of one heart and soul. And if, in heart and soul, you're one . . . If heart and soul are saying something more persuading than all the forces of selfishness, fear and division . . . Unity of heart and soul . . .

In 2009, some economists hired by the Inland Revenue Department to do a study, calculated what it costs to raise a child. They came up with the following. To raise one child in Aotearoa, from birth until its eighteenth birthday, costs \$250,000. Children are expensive! It really makes no financial sense to have a child. Why would we do it? Could it be that there is something at work here that is more relevant than cost? More important than wealth? A different kind of wealth? Every day, in families everywhere, people give away their wealth because love for another has made them one in heart and soul. Heart and soul trump greed. And we don't consider it radical, unusual or strange. We say it's just what we do. We **share** with those whom we love. And yet, we look at the early Christians sharing, and we say "it could never work". Why couldn't it? If risen love has made us one in heart and soul? If Christian people do, even on a limited scale, already give of money and time . . . Why are we so easily persuaded that sharing is never going to happen? If the Easter God has the capacity to make us one in heart and mind . . .

-ooOoo-

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them.

Is it worth a try?

A moment of quiet.

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