

Sermon Archive 198

Sunday 22 April, 2018

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: John 10: 11-18

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Here come the wolves - really hoofing it. Teeth bared, drool dripping, fire in the eyes! Racing, the element of surprise - full of hunger, instinct and violence. Here come the wolves!

There are the sheep, just standing there. Standing there is pretty much what they do most of the time. Just stand there, until one wanders off, then the others follow. Woolly in texture, woolly in intent, hopeless at defending themselves. When the wolves arrive, they'd better have a shepherd - and a good one. Not some hired guy who doesn't care. Not anyone who's frightened and faint. But a shepherd who'll deal with the wolves - a good shepherd.

-ooOoo-

The big contrast in the good shepherd passage is between the people who don't care, and the shepherd who does. It's between the self-preserving people and the self-sacrificing shepherd. It's between the people who turn away, or run away, or leave the problem for the sheep to deal with, and the shepherd who does none of that. Taking charge. Remaining involved. Expressing deep commitment. Refusing to ignore the wolves.

Three matters came to my attention this week.

Israel Folau is a talented Australian rugby player, and a committed conservative Christian. Recently, when asked what God's plan is for gay people, he answered "hell". Unless gay people repent of their sins, turn to God and change their ways, according to Mr Folau, for them it's straight off to hell! This wasn't the first time that this kind of opinion had been expressed. It's been expressed many times, by many Christians, in the hearing of many children, half-formed teenagers, battered and fading strugglers. That theology was the church sound track to the self-hatred and despair of many a young person trying to grow into a beautiful rainbow person. Many a Christian has got away with saying such

things, without the world particularly coming to the defence of the sheep.

But Israel Folau is a famous and widely respected rugby player - in a country where rugby is an obsession. He is something of a cultural high priest. He has what the marketers call "audience reach", and sufficient mana to move that audience. This time, a reaction arose. Quite early on, comment came from Nigel Owen, an experienced international rugby referee from Wales, a gay man, a 46 year old survivor of a suicide attempt made at the age of 24. Nigel said:

"There are young people out there taking their own lives, feeling like I did. And that's what I wish people would think about and the way they convey their opinions, and I wish they would try and understand that everybody's different . . . Judge me and other gay people, judge them on the content of their character, not their sexuality."

T.J. Perenara, a 42 test match All Black, a straight man, has said:

"As professional rugby players, whether we like it or not, we are role models for a lot of young people. Notably, young Māori and Pasifika people. You don't need to look far to know that young Māori/PI are overrepresented in youth suicide statistics and, as I understand it, even more so when you look to those who are part of the rainbow community. Comments that cause further harm cannot be tolerated."

New Zealand Rugby issued a statement: *"New Zealand Rugby is committed to Diversity and Inclusion, and welcomes people from all walks of life. We respect that people have different views and beliefs, however expect that any opinions and views are expressed in a respectful way."*

Rugby Australia announced its decision to take no action, and has not made a statement since. Qantas, the major sponsor the Wallabies, had nothing to say - other than that it had no plans to review its sponsorship. We read that the hired hand tends to run away. For vulnerable youth, for rainbow people, who's the good shepherd here?

The second matter. On this side of the Tasman, interviewed by Radio New Zealand, Ursula Williams is talking about her new documentary. It's called "The Lost Boys of Taranaki", and it's about a youth crime prevention programme. A small, meagrely resourced group in Kaponga, Taranaki, works with fourteen and fifteen year old boys who are going off the rails. Boys are

referred to the group by Youth Justice people who have already assessed them as needing help and yet having potential. One of the main characters whose story is followed is fourteen year old Kelsten from Eltham, Taranaki. Kelsten has a dog he was going to call "Ruthless", but once he noticed she wasn't ruthless at all, called her "Mo". He says he loves his mum because of her cooking, but only a little bit because she's "not really much of a good cook". Mum, Kelly, for her part says "he has hopes and dreams, and [I hope] that he can learn to control his compulsive burglary and make the right decisions. Most of all, I just want to see him happy."

The documentary follows Kelsten through the three week programme. There's the tramping in the wilderness bit. There's the cultural expression bit. There's the relationship building bit, and the reflection of past decisions and formation of future goals bit. Heavily involved in the whole process is Todd. Todd's heavy tattooing makes him look like he's been through a pretty tough life, and indeed he has. He knows well, from the inside, the youth justice system. He says to the camera *"I guess just my personal experience of going through that motivates me to try to make things different for someone else."* *"I was in a [foster] home with Kelsten's dad" and I remember at the time being really confused about it. I didn't understand why these people cared that much, and I felt like they kind of rescued me, you know. I guess I thought about that heaps last week when we went to court and kind of fought for Kelsten to have him come into the programme, rather than go and be locked up for a month."*

So we have Todd trying to help. He says, further into the documentary *"I want them to leave and to continue to learn to feel like they matter - and have that turn into them making good decisions for themselves."*

The next scene is taken two months later. Todd notes that in the two months lots had happened, ranging from the amazing, to the "not so great". "I think it was only a week after the programme finished", he says, "that Kelsten got into some trouble. There's that disappointment when he [expletive] up, and then, as soon as he was back, I felt, you know, I had the same hope for him, the same optimism around his situation like the day before he [expletive] up. I remember that feeling - feeling really powerless, like I couldn't make any choices about my own life, like you're in the tumble dryer, just being [expletive] thrown around. . . . He had to write an apology letter to the

victims of his crimes. He was telling his victims about what he was doing, what he was about to do. The last line said 'I hope I can have a normal life.'

Heavily tattooed Todd pauses, for a tear, then says "And yeah, I think that's my hope for him".

Why do I feel that this man cares - that he will remain engaged?

The wolves are coming. The hired hand runs away, because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd.

The third matter - explored much more briefly. Here come the wolves. It appeared that chemical weapons had been used on civilians in Syria. Because of veto practice within the United Nations, no United Nations response was possible. Instead three nations, the United States, Britain and France, launched missiles at alleged chemical weapons production sites in Damascus. Our Prime minister worked hard to find the right words to express our attitude to what had happened. She stated that UN responses are always the right first approach to international events. She stated that the use of chemical weapons was against international law. She said she could understand why three friend-nations of Aotearoa New Zealand had done what they had done. Listening to her, I got the impression that she was choosing her words very carefully. And maybe careful choice of wording is something that ought to be commended around situations that might blow up in the world's face. Judgments about military responsibility, and involvement in any actions of war do stretch the conscience - and test that thing within us that would listen for the good shepherd. The good shepherd doesn't run away. The good shepherd cares. The good shepherd moves forward with the "love of the Father". I guess the question is, in this arena, as the wolves seek a kill, what would the good shepherd do? How would the good shepherd be identified? For the civilians of Syria, what would good shepherding be?

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand doesn't care. The hired hand runs away. But I am the good shepherd . . .

We keep a moment of quiet.

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