

## Sermon Archive 200

Sunday 13 May, 2018

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Acts 1: 1-11

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Thank you for the opportunity to review these books. They represent a brave attempt, in this time sometimes described as the “era of fake news”, at an author’s honest attempt to tell the truth. I’m not sure how close he gets to the truth, because some of the material comes over as pretty far-fetched. On the basis of truth sometimes being stranger than fiction, though, perhaps we can cut him some slack. He purports to be a researcher, a critical compiler of material, but he comes across as being rather too close, too sympathetic, to really be properly described as dispassionate. His style is homely, sometimes falling into the poetic. The cast of characters is broad, a real smorgasbord of personalities and foibles. The main character is a striking one. I have no idea why the author killed him off so early in the piece, right before the end of the first book. Did I mention there’s more than one book? Maybe it’s time for a more orderly critique.

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First, a bit of an advisory. Although the first book starts with a charming story about Christmas, with bucolic images of shepherds, farm animals and babies, don’t be mistaken. This is not a children’s book. The latter chapters feature scenes of torture and graphic violence. The Office of Film and Literature Classification would fail it on four of the five ratings categories. No sex, admittedly; but it would receive definite fails on the categories of crime, cruelty, horror and violence. I’m not sure the author has quite worked out his target readership. There are so many charming little stories in it - parables that are perfect for a younger audience. But their placement next to stories of politics, corruption, execution and defeat make it completely unsuitable for children. The author has made a

major marketing mistake in this. I suspect the book won't sell very well at all.

The narrative follows the fortunes of the main character, as he tries to celebrate something called "the kingdom". I'm not entirely sure what the kingdom is. Although the author includes many cameo stories about the kingdom, (the kingdom is like this, the kingdom is like that), the kingdom remains a bit of a mystery to the reader. The central figure is a complex figure, sometimes seemingly haunted by visions of his death. I'm not sure you'd describe him as depressive, but he's certainly got this shadow following him. He comes into contact with a vast array of people, some of whom embrace him, some of whom reject him. Despite the mixed reaction, he seems to remain (for the most part) pretty sure about his direction and duty. There's a real sense of insight and confidence to him. As his path becomes more rocky to travel, the character's resolve is comforting. You get the feeling that there is a great wisdom living within him. He has something that the world desperately needs. All the more confusing, then, when the author just kills him off. It feels almost gratuitous, wrong. It's not fair to say that the story goes nowhere; because there are a few little scenes near the end of the book attempting to show that his influence goes on among those who knew him. But like the cameos about the kingdom, it's not immediately evident what the reader is meant to do with these resurrection scenes. And at the end, the baddies who occupied the land, and the baddies who used their religious powers to resist the main character, are still in charge. It almost feels like nothing has changed. So I don't really like the first book. Two out of five stars.

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Not having enjoyed the first book, I had pretty modest expectations of the second one. My hopes rose when the author reinstated the main character back into the narrative. The good one was back, being alive, offering convincing proofs, doing something of a forty day speaking tour about the kingdom. But again, within the first few sentences, the author removed him again. Talking about something called "Spirit", he's taken up into heaven, never to be seen again. This is a major mistake by the

author. All that's left now is a small group of indecisive men and women, bumbling along, unsure of what to do next. For the rest of the book, every time they end up doing anything, they do it only after protracted debates about what needs to be done. They have none of the wisdom or certainty of direction of the missing character. They go on wandering journeys from here to there, sometimes sticking together, sometimes arguing then splitting apart. Every now and then there's an earthquake or a ship wreck. This adds a bit of action. But again, although the action might suggest the author's aiming at a Boys' Own Annual readership, there's insufficient achievement of anything to appeal to the action audience. Any hope of achievement or progress is squashed at the start. Before he disappears from the story, the main character is asked whether this is the time for overthrowing the baddies - for claiming back the glory and autonomy of the people. ("Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?") The main character simply says it's not for them to know. For them it's to be a waiting game. Early on in the story, stay here, wait here, be patient until the season of the Spirit. At the beginning of the second book, I've heard enough from this author. For me it's one and a half stars.

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There it is. The author wrote two books, and I decided that was more than enough. A normally with the disappearance of the central character, and the eventual death of the author, that would be that. This one's a bit odd. Its readership is not like most readerships. This readership speaks about a third book (something like the church historians talk about a third testament. The first testament - the chapters about the people of old. The second testament - the establishment of the new covenant. The third testament - the continuing story as we live it. The first Christians, the next generation of the faithful, the people of Christchurch in 2018 - people who through sacrament, become the new body of the main character. The embodying of the incarnation continues. The articulating of the kingdom continues. The prophetic journey through the resistance of

the rejecters continues. (“Though the cloud from sight received him when the forty days were o’er, shall our hearts forget his promise, ‘I am with you evermore”?)

The author’s committed readership refuse to believe that there are only two books. They actually believe that a third one is being written. One and half stars, to them, is insult. Two books are not enough. They give themselves to be part of the writing of book number three.

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A post script. If you thought that they’d be happy with three books, you won’t believe this. Some of them talk about a fourth. They speak of another chapter to the story - one that hasn’t been written yet, but comes once this current chapter of bumbling and discernment and partial fulfilment is done. A chapter in which the Spirit will complete the work in a new creation. Death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more. Peace will envelope the world as the waters cover the sea. The lion and the lamb will lie down together, and the child and snake will play. The kingdom will no longer be a strange and sketchy mystery, but arms in which we rest. And the main character will gather us in. Five stars! A trillion stars! A perfect story.

Thank you for the opportunity to review these books. Maybe the best writing is yet to come. The church waits for its great coming Pentecost - and it keeps a moment of quiet.

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