

Sermon Archive 201

Sunday 20 May, 2018

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Acts 2: 1-21

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



They began to speak, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Most of us take for granted that we can speak. The simple tasks required of us, through speaking, can be achieved - immediately, easily. Open the mouth; out come the words. Order a block of butter, some onions and some cheese. I speak, and the shop keeper understands. All is simple and well.

With the permission of the author who is with us this morning, I read the story of someone, who as a child, had an experience of not being able to speak. He had a stutter. From the fullness of his spirit he had so much to say, and indeed over many years since he has said many beautiful things. But forming words came hard for him.

Here's his story:

When I was about twelve my mother sent me to the corner grocer for something or other. It was in the days when the grocer stood behind the large counter and fetched whatever it was the customer wanted. Hanging from the ceiling was the string for tying up the parcels. To one side, the huge, gleaming chrome cash-register.

The grocer said "Next". It was my turn. I blocked on the first word! I tried to force the word out. I tossed my head, threw my body about, struggling to say the word. Everyone in the shop was watching, waiting. I felt myself going scarlet all over. Finally, I turned and ran out of the shop, home. I went into my bedroom by the back door and cried into my pillow.

I heard a knock at the door. My mother was not aware I had come home. She went to the door. A voice said "Young John couldn't tell me what it was you wanted". It was the grocer! He went on, "I have brought a pound of butter. I think what he was trying to say started with 'B'." And then I heard him say, "Tell John we love him, stuttering or not".

The human incapacity to express what we want to express. The human frustration that puts tears on the pillow. The human empathy that cares for another enough to guess the word that is missing, to intuit the need not able to be expressed, to want to heal the hurt, to bless the boy with love. Responding to the voiceless, helping people speak - waiting for a Pentecost - the Spirit who gives the gift of speech.

In honour of that Spirit, looking for where the Spirit might be working, here are three stories about voices lost and voices found.

Kate's voice functioned well from early on in her life. She was an educated and articulate young woman. The only problem for Kate was that no one was listening. At a public meeting, she found herself listening to a speech delivered by a visiting temperance movement agitator, Mary Leavitt. As Mary described the sorts of problems caused by alcohol back in her homeland of the United States, a little light when on in Kate's head. As Mary spoke about how the Women's Temperance Union in America was finding a voice in public affairs, a little fire was lit in Kate's belly. She found herself wanting to make progress, here in Christchurch, with the management of alcohol. Immediate focuses for Kate were two: to prevent the sale of alcohol to children, and to prevent women from being employed as barmaids. (It seems that barmaids at the time were subject to all manner of ill treatment and humiliation.) Within increasing confidence, Kate found herself speaking, through the political processes available to her at the time, to politicians. She managed to get a petition as far as the Petitions Committee of Parliament in 1885. The petition was rejected. It seemed that the politicians were not concerned about the vulnerability of the barmaids. Kate's petition fell upon deaf ears. Deciding that her lack of a voice in parliamentary process was not good enough, she changed tack, and began looking for other ways of women to participate in the governing of our country. She launched a campaign to get women the vote. If women could get a vote, then women would have a voice. Kate's second petition to parliament, calling for women to get a vote, carried 31,872 signatures. That was a number the politicians found impossible to ignore. Women were speaking - finding and using their voice. Under her determined speaking up, under her refusal to be silenced by the political process, Kate Sheppard won women a vote in 1893. The finding of a voice, to give others a voice. *They began to speak, as the Spirit gave them ability.*

In 1953 the New Zealand government passed the Maori Affairs Act. One of the things the Act allowed the government to do was compulsorily to acquire Maori land packages that were considered "uneconomic". Any Maori land that wasn't

working in ways that the government could understand, was open for confiscation. Vast tracts of land were taken out of Maori hands. By the early 1970s, although the Norman Kirk led government had slowed the confiscations a bit, it's safe to say that not many people were aware of, let alone concerned about the situation. Within Maoridom, anger and frustration were being voiced - but the voicing was not being heard in the places of power. Coming out of retirement, to add her voice to the voices of the unheard, came an eighty year old grandmother from Panguarua, up North. Having lived a fairly vigorous life, she'd slowed down quite a lot in her older age. Joking, she said of herself "I can do no work now. Only the mouth can talk". So talk she did. "They talk about the Maori language as part of our heritage," she said. "But if our language is to survive and the people to survive, our land must survive also." Leading off the famous hikoi of 1975, Whina Cooper brought the issue of Maori land rights right into the public eye. No longer could society at large ignore the issue. Presented with a petition carrying 60,000 signatures, calling for "not one more acre" to be taken, no longer could the politicians say that the Maori voice didn't matter. For the people who had gone unheard, for the land that could not speak, for the justice that had been silenced - a voice came forth. *They began to speak, as the Spirit gave them ability.*

In a television documentary called "The Sexual Century", there are a number of interviews about what happened at the Stonewall Club in New York's Greenwich Village in 1969. The Stonewall was one of the only places in New York where men could dance with men. It was a tatty, down at heel nightclub. Regularly outside the Stonewall, hanging around park benches over the road, was a group of street kids, rough sleeping and hustling themselves for money, sometimes selling drugs. They were known as the flame queens. This was a neighbourhood that wasn't very nice. Every now and then the police would raid the club - arresting people for same-sex dancing and other theoretically lewd acts. Normally the arrested people would quietly play along - after all, the law wasn't on their side. They really had nothing to say in their defence. No words would work. This one night in 1969, though, as the police started making arrests, something was different. This time the people objected.

Describing the riot that occurred, Jim Fouratt says:

By happenstance I witnessed the moment that I think changed the course of history for gay and Lesbian people all over the world - whether they're conscious of it or not.

These were street kids, run-aways, you know, prostitutes. They were not the kind of people that one would have wanted to have taken that stand, that step that changes things. But it happened, and I remember it ignited me. I just thought argh. The second or third night you had the good gay people, the homophile movement coming, trying to calm things down. They wanted to have a candlelight procession, and to show how nice we were, you know gay people are nice people, we're not violent. I'm one of the people that marched out of that meeting with a bunch of other people and formed the gay liberation front.

On the first anniversary of the Stonewall riots, in 1970, the Gay Liberation Front staged the first public march for gay rights. With placards and chants, from Greenwich Village to Central Park, a big noise was made.

Describing what it was like to march that day, Bob Kohler said: *it was amazing, because once we stepped off the concrete and into the park, we had made it. We knew then that we had done something that had never been done before. This was a march where gay people had pride in themselves - to [speak for ourselves]. So anybody that got into that march, when they made it to the park, were pretty much a changed person.*

Within one year, a movement had been made from having no voice, nothing to say in defence, to saying it proudly. A voice had been found. Dare we say of this *"They began to speak, as the Spirit gave them ability."*

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The human incapacity to express what we want to express. The human frustration that puts tears on the pillow. The human empathy that cares for another enough to guess the word that is missing, to intuit the need not able to be expressed, to want to heal the hurt, to bless the person. Responding to the voiceless - waiting for a Pentecost - the Spirit who gives the gift of speech.

Come, Holy Spirit; give the people a voice. We keep a moment of quiet.

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