

Sermon Archive 203

Sunday 3 June, 2018

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Mark 2:23 - 3:6

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Quite late in her life, my father's sister, Aunty Amy, found a way of visiting us in far flung Auckland. "Far flung" because her regular place of abode was Northern Ireland. She hadn't seen much of her little brother, my father, since he'd emigrated in the early 1950s. Since *his* emigration, *her* life had taken a series of hits: widowed at quite a young age, a solo mother of two, a carer for a pretty challenging set of ageing parents, living amid what the Northern Irish call "the troubles", not having a lot of money to spare. Being a few years older than my father, she could probably be described at the time of her holiday in New Zealand as being almost elderly. In recognition of her being almost elderly, Mum and Dad hadn't crammed her itinerary with any hugely demanding activity - just some gentle sight-seeing, lunch at various seaside cafés, nothing busy. Aunty Amy confessed to a long-standing habit of having a tiny glass of whisky at the end of the day, so Mum and Dad provided her with that.

I can't remember exactly how long Aunty Amy was with us in Auckland, but I do remember one night that I was there, hearing her say to my parents: "thank you for another lovely day". Mum and Dad told me that that's how every day with Aunty Amy ended, during her golden time. "Thank you for another lovely day." When she boarded the plane back to wintry old Northern Ireland, she'd given thanks for some very precious lovely days.

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The lovely day. A quick survey conducted during the week revealed what some Knox people consider a lovely day to be like. One person said a lovely day would have room in it for a walk in the park. A chance to be out there in nature, to see flowers and trees, to breath clean air, to slow down a bit. Another person said the lovely day would have time to spend with family - to get the whole family together around a table set with comforting food. Good

conversation with people you know love you. Another person said “peace and quiet” so she could throw herself into devouring a really good book - undisturbed reading time. **My** thoughts went to a day I had spent in a lovely part of New Caledonia, a beach called Anse Vata. As the sun set over the sea, and the trees by the water took on a beautiful silhouetting, and little lights began to shine from houses across the bay, I took a photo. I took it to remind myself later of a really lovely day - a day full of the sense of its having been a gift. Thank you for a lovely, lovely day. I wonder what kind of day might come to your mind as you think of a lovely day. What comes to your mind, when you think of a day that has been a gift?

I’m going to stop talking now - just for thirty seconds. The gift of a lovely day.

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Way back in time, even before anyone wrote it down, there was this story about a god whose delight it was to make lovely days. It was morning, it was evening, the first day. It was morning, it was evening, the second day. Six days in total. Into each of the days the god placed beautiful things: light, land, sea, the line between the sea and the sky; mountains and trees, every animal, variety, loveliness, people who know and love us, the gift of language. And anyone who saw it would say of it “this is very good”. And to crown the giving of days, was given the gift of a special “day of days” - a seventh day for people to rest in the beauty of the whole thing - to have time and space to behold it - to embrace it - to experience it as “gift” from a loving, effusive god - thank you, thank you for another lovely day.

Fast forward. My father is a small boy, growing up in Northern Ireland, with his big sister, Amy, and the middle child, Arthur. Having spent an uncomfortable couple of hours sitting up straight in a rent-paid pew in First Derry Presbyterian Church, now they are sitting up straight at their grandparents’ dining room table, listening to grandpa say a very, very long, jagged, criticising grace. Later in the day they’ll have the Presbyterian delight of visiting the Jack plot at the cemetery on the hill, stopping solemnly at each grave of every dead Jack there is. (Focus on death.) When eventually the children escape the regular torture of “Sabbath time with the grandparents”, and get home again, there will be no reading of comics or

listening to the radio. How did we get here? There has been some strange transition. From “thank you for these lovely days” to a drear duty of Sabbath observance. From gift to demand. From “this if for you”, to “mind your step, child”. From “gift of God”, to “God’s trap for Sabbath failers”.

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Jesus looks around with anger. He is grieved at the hardness of the human heart. He’s only just spoken about the Sabbath being made for people, rather than people being made for the Sabbath; yet here are these people, Pharisees, goading him into doing a deed of compassion, so they can use the Sabbath to break him, and bring him down. They’ve turned the Sabbath into a weapon. A weapon against Jesus. A weapon against a man with a withered hand. A weapon against compassion and healing. I can almost hear Jesus asking “how did we get to this?”

I don’t want to spend much time this morning pursuing “how we got to this”. I think it’s got something to do with the Pharisees fearing loss of social standing to the increasingly popular Jesus. It’s got something to do with the Pharisees having made a profitable industry out of technical detail and legal intricacy – and not wanting to lose that. It’s got something to do with the comfort some people find in rigid moral structures - that give us black and white. But most of all, as Jesus says, it’s because we easily lose perspective on what serves whom - what comes first - what is most important. Were people made for the Sabbath, or was the Sabbath made for us? “He aha te mea nui o te ao? He tangata, he tangata, he tangata.” That’s enough, I think, on how we got to here.

What’s more interesting than that is what Jesus then does with “where we are”. When confronted with a weapon-wielding people, when confronted by people who would keep the hand withered, he defiantly says, in their hearing, “stretch out your hand”. Jesus presses on with God’s work of healing, of restoring, of doing the compassionate thing.

Within a culture of crushing, containing, perpetuating the suffering, Jesus tells the withered hand to stretch out, and be healed.

Should some Pharisees say to the church, we have a law - and by that law, a certain sector of the population ought not to be allowed to marry. It's black and white, in the Bible. By this law, certain loving, mutually respectful relationships should not receive blessing. There is a law not to be broken. Jesus says "stretch out your hand".

Should some Pharisees say to some boat people, you have not sought proper permission to arrive on these shores. You have broken our law; you must be turned away. There is a law not to be broken. Jesus says "stretch out your hand".

Should some Pharisees say to someone in chronic pain, for whom regular pain management isn't working, marijuana is illegal; we have a law. In respect to that law, you will just need to continue bearing your pain. There is a law not to be broken. Jesus says "stretch out your hand".

And what are we to do, as our society speaks to itself about "end of life" / assisted suicide? Certainly, it *is* against the law. Is the voice calling for a change of law a dark, murderous voice, a killer? Or is it Jesus saying "stretch out your hand". We might struggle to work that out. But Jesus' way through the hardness of heart, through the weapon-izing of scripture and morality, is to return to the insight that humankind was not made for the Sabbath, but the Sabbath for humankind. He tangata. Returning to the love and creative generosity of the One who would give the gift of the lovely day.

We can turn the most beautiful gifts into the most oppressive regimes. Jesus stands among the Pharisees, and calls them to remember that the law was made from them, not them for it. God loves them, and has come in Jesus to make them free - to put redeeming love into the day.

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Grieved at the hardness of the human heart, Jesus said to the man "stretch out your hand". He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. Jesus breaks the law, blesses the hand. The gift of a lovely day.

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