

Sermon Archive 206

Sunday 1 July, 2018

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: Exodus 20: 12-17

Romans 12: 9-18

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



I'll tell you a secret. Sometimes people don't get along. In fact, if I were writing some mythical story about the nature of humanity, early on in the piece I'd introduce a couple of brothers, one Cain and the other Abel. And I'd have an argument break out among them. I might even have one kill the other. Because disagreement, the breaking of the peace, violent injustice, is a common experience for human beings. Maintaining justice and keeping peace presses hard against our deepest nature. It involves hard work.

-ooOoo-

James Cook sailed into the beautiful harbour of Kororareka. The sun sparkled off the water; vegetables grew in the gardens. To the early eye, it all might have been described as "idyllic". Two members of Cook's crew went ashore, and raided some kumara from one of the vege gardens. This caused unhappiness among the gardeners, and a skirmish broke out. Unimpressed with his crew, James Cook ordered six lashes to the backs of each sailor. This is generally considered to be the first deed of British justice executed on these shores.

Cook then sailed away, leaving Kororareka to get on with its life. That life included the assimilation of whalers and traders, missionaries and soldiers. It included the odd convict, escaped from the prisoner-tight prisons of New South Wales. (Build a wall!) It included the clashing of different cultures. It included one grim visit from a ship full of mutineers who thought it was OK to kidnap locals and do awful things to them.

In 1809, the Boyd, pulled into the Whangaroa harbour to pick up some timber. In utu for an earlier offence caused by Boyd people, local Maori attacked the ship, killing every one of the seventy crew and passengers on

board. It's no secret: sometimes people don't get on.

Governor Macquarie, from across the ditch, in New South Wales, formed the view that things couldn't go on like this. Justice needed establishing. Peace needed making. And so it was, that on a Tuesday, 14 June, 1814, Thomas Kendall came ashore, to be Aotearoa New Zealand's first Justice of the Peace. He wasn't here to witness signatures. Justice! Peace! Order!

From the start, Kendall's work was difficult. Although he had a warrant from the Governor to order people, he had no way of **enforcing** order. He had no police officers, no local militia. He had no lock up facilities, no handcuffs or leg irons. Any significant judicial decision he made had to be approved by Sydney; and sometimes approval from Sydney, by the way of writing a letter took months. In the meantime, people "assisting Thomas with his enquiries" just ran away.

There was also the slight complication for Thomas that the tangata whenua rejected his authority to do anything. For generations they'd had their own ways of keeping peace and administering justice. Who the hell was Thomas Kendall? Why should they help him out? Not only is it no secret that people sometimes don't get along. It's also well known that turning up with some laws, even when other societies worship those laws, nothing quite makes for peace.

Moses came down from the mountain. In his arms he had two tablets of stone. Upon the stone, unfadingly carved, were ten great commandments - some of which were read to us this morning. The commandments were plain. They didn't muck around. Don't murder. Don't steal. Don't commit adultery. Do that - and you'll live in peace. Simple! State the law. Simple! Simple? How did it go for that people?

Having a law isn't enough. Having Thomas Kendall speaking the law isn't enough. Making clear what is required, for far away, isn't enough. Having Moses with his chiselled law isn't enough. Justice? Peace? Order? It's no secret: sometimes people don't get along, and proclaiming the law to them isn't enough.

-ooOoo-

There is a voice in our community that comes forth often. It says, in

response to crime and disorder, that we just need to speak the law more loudly. We have to express the law more firmly. If you punish people more rigorously, then that will be enough. Be sensible! Order will come. Peace will break out. Will it?

-ooOoo-

Millennia before Thomas Kendall, but centuries after Moses, someone called Paul had *his* attempt at getting people to live in peace. In a letter he wrote to the Christians in Rome, he wrote “if it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all”. If it is possible. So far as it depends on you. It sounds as if Paul has learned from experience that peace is not a simple task that a single person can impose on others. There are other, more complex, relational matters at work. There may be others who need to be brought into the task. There may be more than one-way shouting required. But “try” says Paul, “to live peaceably with all”.

With his expectations suitably calibrated, low, Paul starts talking about what living peaceable might need. An expert in the law, he talks about things other than shouting the law. He talks about people learning to be genuine in the loving of other people. He talks about holding on fast to what is good. (How do you protect the good in the other person?) He talks about cultivating honour. He talks about hope - hoping for the good and growth of the community. He talks about being patient as we suffer. (Yes, we can all be angry in suffering - Paul asks for the cultivation of patience.) He talks about contributing to the needs of the saints - taking care of the other. He talks about making room for the stranger - making of the stranger a neighbour. He talks of weeping with those who weep - which you can only do if you notice who is weeping. Is that “empathy”? He also talks about a willingness not to repay evil for evil - but seeking something that is nobler, more ennobling, than that: working to the bigger picture . . . Paul calls those who seek justice and peace to build a new society. Something based on . . .

I wonder whether Paul was just a dreamer. Trying to build a new complicated peaceable way of being together - when it's simpler just to shout the law more loudly.

-ooOoo-

Jean Vanier was a respected academic in the field of philosophy. He'd established a teaching career and published books. Announcing his resignation from the University of Toronto in 1964, he cited, as his resignation reason, a desire to take up a "more spiritual calling". That calling was the foundation of the first Larche community - where people with developmental disabilities lived alongside those who cared for them. It was founded on the principle that the developmentally disabled are genuine people - not problems for society to fix - or objects from whom society ought to flee. (Siblings in being.) The Larche community was based on principles of genuineness in love, of holding fast to what is good, of treating people with honour, of hoping for the other, being patient during the suffering, of weeping with those who weep. Does that sound familiar? (Did someone else, in search for proper human community not describe such things? Thank you Paul.) Is it, in fact, a genuine attempt in a real time and place, to embody the kind of dream that Paul had for people living in peace? Well, under God's blessing there are now 147 Larch communities in 35 different countries across the world.

In his book, *Finding Peace*, Vanier writes: "Peace is the fruit of love, a love that is also justice. But to grow in love requires work -- hard work. And it can bring pain because it implies loss - loss of the certitudes, comforts, and hurts that shelter and define us."

He also writes: "True peace can rarely be imposed from the outside; it must be born within and between communities through meetings and . . ."

Whatever! The cynic adds, "and if **that** doesn't work, we could always shout more loudly the law".

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I'll tell you a secret: sometimes people don't get on. Thomas Kendall comes ashore. He's got a long way to go - as do we. "As much as it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live at peace" - work on this new sharing of life. Order, justice, peace. Waiting for the God who reforms . . .

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