

## Sermon Archive 214

Sunday, 2 September 2018

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Mark 7:1-8,14-15,21-23

Preacher: Revd Dr Ken Booth



### Our real self comes from the heart

New Zealand sits at the bottom of the world. We have a huge moat around us in the form of the Tasman Sea and the Pacific Ocean. While unwanted seeds and some bird life have got here from Australia without approval by our border controls, people have a little chance of getting here unless they fly or are very intrepid sailors. It gives us a bit of luxury and can at times allow a sort of moral superiority as we look at the United States and, increasingly, the nations of Europe as they close their borders to the tide of refugees. Closer to home we can feel a bit of superiority over our Australian neighbours and their handling of the arrival of refugees on their northern shores. At our safe distance, we can be faintly amused by refugees beaching their boat only to be confronted by crocodiles.

Protection of borders is a serious business. Some see it as defending one's national identity, one's culture, one's life-style. This issue of boundaries and protection gets murkier and murkier the closer you look at it and the closer it comes to home. A few weeks back two Canadian speakers Stefan Molyneux and Lauren Southern were invited to New Zealand (or did they invite themselves? I'm not sure). It all became a leading news item, especially when Phil Goff denied them access to any Auckland City Council venue for their address. Suddenly the nation was embroiled in a debate about freedom of speech. And then, with perfect timing, Massey University refused Don Brash an opportunity to speak, citing safety concerns. And right now the debate is on about letting Chelsea Manning come and speak here. Doing that, of course, may irritate the American administration and put our trade at risk. Nothing is simple. Where are the boundaries?

You can see what happens if you care to look on the web and read the comments on any of the above issues. There is a lot of heat and not a lot of light. One of the downsides of the web is people do not have to discuss things, they can just shout at the world. An open debate is much more difficult to find. But make no mistake, all that hoo-ha is just as much about defining and defending boundaries as border walls, turning back boats in the Mediterranean, or deporting New Zealanders to a "home"

they have never known.

And then there is the church. We proclaim the good news in Jesus Christ, but sometimes this is no simpler than issues like freedom of speech. Where are the boundaries and who defines them? Just try asking the real Christians to stand up and see who gets to their feet! I could introduce you to several historical synods and meetings of the church where a lot of bitter insults were flung across the aisles, and even the occasional punch-up.

Let me tell you a story that may shed some light on why in all these things we need to begin with the person in front of us, the one to whom we are talking and listen to them from the heart. For four and a half years I was Warden of Selwyn College in Dunedin, offering a home to students of Otago University from around the country. For reasons that had a lot to do with government policy changes, there were fewer students than usual wanting to go to Otago in 1982. So heads of colleges pored over such student applications as there were, and did what we could to survive. Ask John McKean about it over coffee after the service! Among the applicants for Selwyn was a young man from Auckland. His school reference was not very encouraging, but a fee-paying student was a fee-paying student, so I offered him a place. At times later that year I thought that was a mistake, and certainly I wasn't sorry to see him go at the end of the year.

Thirty-six years later, in other words, earlier this year, I met up with him again at the 125th anniversary celebrations of the College. Two things were fascinating about the conversation we had. He apologised for being such a difficult student, which was nice to hear. It became obvious as he talked that so much of that difficulty had stemmed from his confusion about himself, who he was, and his orientation. In 1982 when he was a young man, his confusion came out in the form of a certain amount of what is politely called anti-social behaviour, though other terms spring to mind.

Despite that start, he went on to become an academic and recently turned in a doctoral thesis on gay men coming out later in life. Most of those he interviewed had had some relationship with the church, and the uncomfortable thing I found on reading the thesis was the extent to which the church had seen its role as drawing boundaries, defining who is in and who is out and why. Most churches were intent on stating what they thought was right instead of listening to the men themselves. You need to get inside the other before making any judgement about how things are. It is always an inside job.

That, too is the burden of this morning's reading from Mark's Gospel. We last met the Pharisees and Scribes in Mark back in chapter 3. There they were upset about Jesus doing things on the Sabbath that were not right for a faithful Jew.

This time it is about ritual washings and food. It all looks pettifogging to us, but that is to misunderstand it. Israel was always at the crossroads of the Middle East and in danger of losing its identity by being swallowed by one of the big powers with interests in the area: Egypt, Persia, Babylon, Greece, and most recently, Rome.

In defiance of this Israel believed in a divine purpose for their very existence. They of all people were God's special people, with a way of living and being that was a light to the world. They remembered bitterly the exile to Babylon five hundred years before. They saw this as God's punishment for their failure to live up to their calling. Those who returned from exile to rebuild the nation were determined that "never again" was such a thing to happen. They would be faithful to God and the covenant and be the people of God they were called to be, the chosen people. The signs of this covenant were circumcision, the Sabbath, and the rituals of separation and food traditions that marked them off from the surrounding nations. The boundaries and the boundary markers were there to protect their identity. The Pharisees and Scribes saw their roles as keeping the nation on the straight and narrow, defending the truth as they saw it, by keeping to the tradition and its rules.

There is no doubt that Mark has exaggerated the strictness of the Pharisees to make his point. Not all Jews were as rule-bound as that, and some just couldn't afford to be. There were many who just couldn't keep the rules meticulously. They had to make a living where they could and do business with whomever they must. They couldn't afford the niceties of the well-heeled and rigorists. Tax collectors, prostitutes, peasants, not to mention the lame, the deaf and the blind, those on the margins of society, just couldn't do it. And it is precisely to the margins of society that Jesus speaks, for in his book they are as much the children of God as those in the temple. And not long after the resurrection the early church was admitting Gentiles. The barriers have gone!

Jesus cites the prophetic tradition to set the Pharisees straight. Being faithful to God is not a matter of externals and protecting the boundaries. It is, as Isaiah had said, a matter of the heart. It is an inside job. This is followed up by a list of where defilement really comes from. The list mirrors in many respects the don'ts of the 10 commandments. What characterises these sins is that they are all acts of power over and abuse of other people. At the heart of not being defiled is standing alongside the other as my brother or sister. We easily misunderstand that word "defiled". It's about not being a proper Jew. We don't think of it in those terms any more, but we will completely understand it if we say, "Real New Zealanders don't . "

It all starts from what we are like inside. Jesus could have made almost the same point made by Isaiah by quoting from the Psalm we read as our first reading:

Lord, who may be a guest in your house, or who may dwell on your holy mountain?

One who leads a blameless life, who does what is right, speaks truthfully from the heart, whose tongue is free from malice, who never wrongs a friend, and utters no reproach against a neighbour, who does not honour the unworthy, but makes much of those who fear the Lord.

Whoever does all this, shall never be overthrown.

Being God's guest or dwelling on God's mountain is not achieved by ritual, but by inner conversion. It's an inside job. Being a real New Zealander is also an inside job. So how do we nourish that openness of heart that will enable us to see God? I can think of no better place to start than with this communion service. The hospitality is open. We are invited to break bread with God. To do that we must also break bread with one another. There in a nutshell is the gospel that puts us all on the same level, where exploitation is unthinkable, unthinkable. The one I meet here is another like myself. As you do that, just don't look too hard at the church's track record of responding like that. But here at this table, what we find impossible, in Christ becomes our truth.

Sometimes it appears in another way, just to show that the Spirit of Christ is at work even where Christ is not named. The Spirit blows where it will. A friend was in the hospice, dying. But what kept him going was a daily flat white. I would get that for him from the coffee shop down the road. The owner of the shop did not know my friend or have any connection with him, and no connection with the church so far as I know. But, in chatting to him as he made the coffee, I said it was for a friend in the hospice. When he had made the coffee, he handed it to me and then refused to take any payment. That went on for weeks, simply because the dying man wanted a coffee to keep him going. It came from the heart.

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