

Sermon Archive 215

Sunday 30 September, 2018

Knox Church, Christchurch

Reflections on a quilt

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Reading: Psalm 19: 7-11

Reflection: The book and the alcove - on being trapped

The left panel of Sue's quilt features the recreation of a carving on the side of a church in the Holy Land. The carving is stone, and it's set inside a little alcove, its right elbow pressed up hard against one side of the alcove, its left index figure pressed up hard against the other side. He's a thoroughly contained little figure.

Although his bare feet are pointing in a definite direction, he's not going to be able to get where he wants to go. He's hemmed in by the alcove - only the top edge of his halo poking out the top.

Into his mind we go!

-ooOoo-

The Lord be with you, people. It's a nice little phrase I like to use when I meet people - wishing people the presence of God. I've noticed that you people, in your time, tend not to greet one another that way. You tend to shake hands. One day I'll give some thought to what the hand shake expresses. I think I heard somewhere that offering your right hand was showing the other person that your sword wasn't at the ready. Extend your fighting hand, show it to be empty, indicate that you're there in peace. Sounds plausible, I suppose. But I'm not going to shake your hand. My hand's not available. It is in my hand, clasped close to my heart (and you can think about the symbolism of *that*), that I hold my sacred book. Did you know that the law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul? Did you know that its precepts are right, its commandments are clear? Did you know that the text warns and guides me?

So my halo shines, showing me holy. So my shoes come off, showing me humble. So my feet take a definite direction - like someone who knows where I'm heading. The trouble is that I just can't move. I'm trapped in this alcove - this little frame that hems me in. Pressed from the left, pressed from the right. Pressed from behind, pressed to the fore. Carrying my book, the book that occupies the hand that normally I would extend in greeting, I am frozen in stone.

More to be desired than gold, sweeter also than drippings of the honey comb, are the things in my book. They're perfect. They guide me. But how can I be guided when I cannot move?

So I become an image of faith entrapped. I want to say "I love you", but I can't because the book says "God hates you". I want to hear your story, but the book calls me always and only to tell its story. I want to learn your language, but the book says "other languages are dangerous or fallen". I have this deep longing to walk with you, to do a real pilgrimage of faith with others - but I'm stuck in this bloody alcove. I'm not going anywhere.

A Musical Response

Reading: Ephesians 1: 15-19

Reflection: The eyes of the heart - on seeing with the heart

Does it seem to you, people, that one of my most prominent features are my eyes. They big, wide and open. The patch-working has them on one of the lightest, sharpest panels. You look at me and notice my eyes. Of course my eyes are important. It's with them that I read my book, see those statues.

But in this image of me, my eyes aren't focussed on the book. They're fixed firmly forward - towards that second panel. A major part of that second panel is the dark of my alcove. It's only as I look out, look forward, that I notice how dark it is in here - how light the world beyond actually is by contrast. The window in my prison cell becomes a frame through which I notice the light. And it's like suddenly I am being prayed for - the rich gathering of saints and others praying that light might come upon me - that I may not just dream of, but actually **know** the hope to which I'm called, the immeasurable greatness of having my eyes opened - the eyes of my heart. Revelation.

In the frame I see sky. I see a hill and a far off winter-stark tree. It is all very far - and all very light. And on the hill, on the brightest part beneath the tree, is that sacred text? Text written on the earth, in the landscape? Is it that the One who wrote my sacred book has also written on the dirt and grass and contours of the earth? Has the author burst out of the book I keep close to my heart? Has God escaped into the winter world and made it bright?

This has a strange power and attraction to me - stuck in my alcove. Is that which arises in me now called "hope"? Is that desire to leave my alcove called "calling"? Is my stirring conviction that there is where I'm meant to be called "faith"?

There is a frame through which we see that to which we are called. There is a frame through which we see, with enlightened heart, that the alcove is at most a three-day grave from which we are beckoned by the great One who raises the dead. There is a frame that changes what our eyes are for: not simply for reading a book we felt was perfect already - but for filling us with wonder as we perceive the distant, glorious light.

I pray that God may give you a spirit of wisdom, so that with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know the hope into which you have been called. If only you can get out of that alcove.

A Musical Response

Reading: Revelation 21: 1-7

Reflection: The whole earth shall cry “Glory!” - on becoming new and free

In the third panel, the frame has gone, and it seems that I have made the break into that world that called me. The tree is now close up - right before my eyes. It has detail and softness. And there is life and pattern I never saw before. The spiral of a shell, the swimming of a fish, shade and dapple. It is new. I am new. All is new!

In the words of a Scottish minister:

Holy Spirit, Enlivener:

breathe on us, fill us with life anew.

In your new creation, already upon us, breaking through,

groaning and travailing,

but already breaking through,

breathe on us.

Till that day when night and autumn vanish:

and lambs grown sheep are no more slaughtered:

and even the thorn shall fade

and the whole earth shall cry Glory at the marriage feast of the Lamb!

In this new creation, already upon us,

fill us with life anew.

[George MacLeod]

Shall I return to my alcove?

I want to say “I love you”, but I can’t because the book says “God hates you”. I want to hear your story, but the book calls me always and only to tell its story. I want to learn your language, but the book says “other languages are dangerous”. I want to walk with you, to do a real pilgrimage of faith . . . Coming out from the alcove . . . into God’s world in peace.

A Musical Response

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