

Sermon Archive 218

Sunday 21 October, 2018

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Hebrews 5: 1-10

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



This sermon isn't one in which a single line of thought is followed through systematically. There's no argument as such. It's more a series of thoughts on prayer: the experience, the discipline, the lack of discipline, the peace, the mystery, the failure, the community of the great cloud of witnesses, the love, the frustration, of praying for and with others.

It came into being because the reading from Hebrews talks about priesthood (and remember there is a thing called "the priesthood of all believers") as something which is service of others, living for others, making sacrifice for others, bearing with the weakness of others - and presents it all in the image of Jesus praying. Jesus, the priest, prays. We, the priest, pray.

Indeed, a series of thoughts on the priesthood of prayer.

-ooOoo-

The first thought.

I've spoken in the past of a friend of mine called Derek - an extremely non-pious but strongly principled Catholic who decided that he would take a break from his Med School studies to volunteer for a year as a school teacher in Papua New Guinea. His placement was organised by an organisation called Catholic Overseas Volunteer Services. At the time of his imminent departure from Dunedin for the wilds of PNG, I would have described him as my best friend. "Best friend" is perhaps an overly simplistic concept - every friend is important and there's no competition around "best". Suffice it to say that I enjoyed his company and he was important to me.

Because his appointment to PNG was being organised by a Catholic organisation, and his service overseas was interpreted as a Christian act of ministry, Derek's local church put on something of a commissioning service. The congregation of the Church of the Holy Name, Derek, and some of his friends gathered one Sunday evening to worship God and dedicate Derek to his work and to pray for him.

I can't remember much about the service itself, but I do remember clearly the moment when we, the congregation of friends, were meant to be praying for him. Half way through the prayer I remember realising that I had no idea what the priest was praying. I'd zoned out. My attention had gone somewhere else. I remember suddenly hating myself for it. For goodness sake, this man is your best friend. Could you not even pray for him? And then, almost immediately, an almost overwhelming sense of sadness that he was leaving. Shouting at myself, almost crying, fearing and feeling, it felt most certainly like a failure in prayer. I wonder if it was.

-ooOoo-

The second thought.

A bi-lingual colleague of mine found himself at an event where he was thrown together with a group of strangers and asked to pray together. The group was multi-culturally rich and some of the prayers being prayed were not in English. At morning tea, after the prayer, a member of the group told my colleague that he hadn't said "Amen" to the non-English prayers, because, not knowing what had been prayed, he didn't know whether he wanted to say "Amen – so be it". This set off for my colleague a series of thoughts. Yes, he too hadn't understood what was being prayed. He too hadn't had access to the linguistic content of the prayers. He however **had** said "amen". Was it a non-critical sense of politeness that had made him say "Amen"? Had he been spiritually irresponsible? He thought, however, that maybe he'd just kind of trusted that the people he'd been praying with were expressing something good, or worthy, or to be encouraged. And then he remembered other times when he'd said "Amen" to prayers in other languages quite easily, because he **knew** the people who were praying. And in the knowing, in the trusting, he wasn't concerned about the words. What if prayer isn't about words anyway? What if it's about sitting next to others as God somehow is addressed - maybe imperfectly addressed - maybe even ignorantly and waywardly - since we're all subject to weakness. What if prayer is about relationship, being with others in concern and hope, being unsure of what should be said anyway, being unsure that anything should be said? If you and I were to sit next to each other in our hope for God, would silence be enough for us to say "Amen"?

Because once words become less important than trust, or relationship, or being with the other in hope, then the priesthood of prayer becomes something different - a dealing gently with others - a branch within a vine, a being within a great cloud of witnesses.

-ooOoo-

A third thought.

Within my treasure chest of friends, there are two (who don't know each other) who know that something is medically wrong. They have undergone some initial assessment, and are waiting for a diagnosis. One of them is full of years, and one is still quite young. Both, I think, are scared. One, I know is not religious. The other I can't work out. He's either religious and scared, or "over" religion, once having been burned, and now being angry with those who speak about God. For precious friend number one, the offer of prayer would not be appreciated - because I know where she's coming from. For precious friend number two, I have no idea what to do or say, because I don't know where he's coming from. So whether I do know the faith position, or don't know the faith position, I don't know what to offer.

I have taken, recently, to the practice of saying the daily office of evening prayer fashioned by St Benedict. The words of the daily office are not my words. They were written by an Italian monk fifteen hundred years ago. The words have been used by generations of other monks who did not know Benedict but who trust his way of prayer. They are prayers that have been prayed together, by people sitting next to one another, for a very long time. Not my words, but definitely my friends. Trust, concern, responding to the fear you know they are facing. I start my evening prayers thinking of my friends, thinking of their fear, not fully understanding what it is they think or want. And I pray the evening prayer.

The image presented of Jesus, the great high priest, with his loud cries and tears, echoes the image of him praying in the garden of Gethsemane. The "I don't want to drink this cup" prayer of a man who is frightened. Is the priesthood of prayer an offering to God of our fear? (I will hold the Christ light for you, in the night time of your fear.) Prayer as an offering to God of our cries and tears that others are frightened - and we're frightened too. Is a tear not equally much a prayer than is a word?

-ooOoo-

A fourth thought.

The praying priest, Jesus, is described as one serving in keeping with the order of Melchizedek. Of Melchizedek next to nothing is known. He's a simple walk-

in / walk-out figure from the early chapters of the story of Abraham. As Abraham comes back from a victory on the battlefield, he's met by a couple of local kings, among whom is Melchizedek. The thing that sets Melchizedek apart from the others who welcome and congratulate Abraham is that he comes out, comes forth, with bread and wine, and a prayer that sounds like a blessing - a word of congratulations. Bread to sustain. Wine with which to celebrate. I may weep when you are weeping, but when you laugh I'll laugh with you - till we've seen this journey through. Then Melchizedek disappears, until his curious mention fifteen hundred years later as the one in whose likeness Jesus is the great high priest. Simply he's the one who celebrates with food and wine, who is hospitable, who gives.

There it is. I do not know what words to pray. I do not know what my friends want or need. I do not know what success in prayer would be. But I can cry, and I can be kind. I can share my bread, and offer my cup. And in doing these things, perhaps I can find a way of conveying a blessing. Could it be that in being kind we are exercising a great high priesthood?

-ooOoo-

In the Church of the Holy Name, my mind goes wandering, and I fail to pray. All I can do is shout at myself and feel sad about an absence about to occur. Is it a failure in prayer? A colleague wonders about languages and thinks about trusting and saying "Amen" anyway. Friends struggle with fear and nothing is clear about what we're to do. And Jesus the great high priest comes to us, lives among us as one of us. He gives bread and wine, and expresses his own fear in the garden. He deals with the ignorant and wayward - he works within the sins of self and others. He seeks no glory for himself - and somehow salvation occurs, God and people are speaking again, connection is won.

I promised no sustained argument or single line of systematic thought. I predicted a series of thoughts on prayer. Love, fearing, being with the other. Crying, rejoicing, old Italian words offered for those in the treasure chest of friends old and young. Not knowing what to say; saying "Amen" anyway. A meditation on prayer - a great high priesthood.

We keep a moment of quiet.

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