

Sermon Archive 220

Sunday 4 November, 2018

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Deuteronomy 6: 1-9

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



From the book of Proverbs, chapter 15, there comes some wisdom: “Better a small serving of vegetables with love than a fattened ox with hatred”.

-ooOoo-

Out the back of the line of fibrolite prefabs at Owairoa Primary School, up the hill, there was the smaller sports field. Children sat around it or ran about it not just during supervised activities, but also during lunchtime. Down one side there was a line of macrocarpa trees - rumoured to be the home to a hundred thousand giant weta. Opposite, down the other end of the field, was a big high wooden wall. Along the back boundary, furthest from the prefabs, ran a simple, low hurricane wire fence, separating the field from the back gardens of three or four ordinary houses on Eliot Street. Perilously close to the fence in one of the gardens, perhaps even provocatively hanging its fruit towards the fence, was an apple tree. And hanging from the apple tree, among the apples, was a little wooden sign - upon which was written the words “thou shalt not steal”.

It was the first time I had ever seen scripture used publically: an announcement to the toe-rags and gutter-snipes of Owairoa to leave those apples alone. It’s interesting that I remember that sign all these years later. It clearly made an impression. I don’t imagine I noticed it because I had any serious intent to go apple stealing. I never did get far down the road of theft. But I do remember thinking that it had a sort of old fashioned authority to it - the use of “thou” and “shalt” - the child-frightening gravitas of old fashioned grammar. I also remember thinking that the person who lived in that house (and made and hung the sign) was probably old and cantankerous. The feeling definitely wasn’t of warmth. As an adult, I can now concede that the sign could have come into being after a long, discouraging experience of losing apples just as they ripened - not only having to contend with birds, but with greedy children. Goodness knows; maybe that household needed the home-grown fruit because it had precious little money to spend at the grocers. None of that dawned on

the child looking at the sign. It just seemed to me that scripture was hanging there in the tree, being unfriendly. What was, or wasn't I sensing from scripture?

Better a small serving of vegetables with love than a fattened ox with hatred.

Years later I found myself travelling through Northern Ireland, going down some semi-rural road on the way to somewhere. To the side of the road, poking up from behind a lichen-growing wooden fence, was a sign. Locals call such signs "wayside pulpits": scripture verses, with no further commentary, erected in public view. This one said to me, and to anyone else who might pass, "the wages of sin is death". Those familiar with the fuller text of Romans 6 will know that the rest of the verse says "but the gift of God is eternal life". But the erector of this particular pulpit seemed to have seen no need to include the good news - just the bad. It made me wonder what kind of person might erect such a sign. Why, when he or she could have said **anything** to the public, did they go with sin and death. This entirely eclipsed the negativity of the apple tree sign. I don't know; perhaps the child of the sign owner had been killed in a bombing. Bombings had been happening in Ireland at that time, all the time. Maybe the sign had been erected in pain or grief. Since no back-story was evident, it seemed to me, at the time, that scripture was coming entirely out of gloom and hatred. The public use of scripture - sin and death. Is something missing?

Better a small serving of vegetables with love than a fattened ox with hatred.

I haven't been able to find any background to the picture on the front of the order of service. I have no idea where, when or by whom it was taken. The man on the right has his scripture verse, slightly paraphrased, printed loud and proud. Leviticus 18:22: homosexuality is an abomination to God almighty. I wonder why he feels he wants to, or needs to, take his sign out into the public space. Perhaps at some time in his life he has received unwanted attention from a gay person and has felt abused. Perhaps he has gay feelings himself, and is struggling to deal with them. Or perhaps he has a deep religious conviction and is writing it all over his world - on his doorposts and his gates, at home and while travelling about, as he rises and lies down, as he speaks to the children and searches his heart. Why not take the commandment out there? Has Deuteronomy not commanded him to write the commandments all over his world? Maybe he's just being faithful. Or maybe he's just being a bigot.

Next to him, also at the protest, is someone whom I think is dressed up as a donkey. His sign has an arrow on it, pointing towards Mr Leviticus. The sign says “Never misses a gay event”. That’s called derision. Around the public presenting of scripture comes judgment and derision, condemnation and mockery. As the Word goes up on the doorposts and gates, goes out into every corner of life, something hasn’t worked. Is something missing?

Better a small serving of vegetables with love than a fattened ox with hatred.

The book of Deuteronomy has Moses addressing the people. He tells them that they are to treasure God’s commandments in their hearts. They are to write God’s words all over their world: on their teaching of the children, on their coming home and travelling away, on their rising up in the morning, lying down at night, on their hands, on their foreheads, on the doorposts and on the gates - no specific mention of apples trees, wayside pulpits or protest banners, but on every surface of life.

One way that orthodox Judaism responded to this instruction was to create the tefillin - little leather boxes to be strapped to the foreheads and right arms of men. Inside the little leather boxes are parchments, carrying quotes from the Torah - God’s law. Orthodox men, at worship, literally wear God’s commandments on their foreheads and on their hands. It’s a sartorially questionable, but daringly literal living out of Moses’ instructions to write scripture everywhere - to publish it abroad.

I don’t imagine tefillin were worn by many of the bulldozer drivers of the Occupied Palestinian Territories, nor by those responsible for the policies described by the United Nations’ Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia as “apartheid against Palestinians”. Because it wouldn’t make sense, would it, for scripture to be worn in public, quoted in public, written all over public space, by people doing hateful things?

Better a small serving of vegetables with love than a fattened ox with hatred.

It may be scriptural (Proverbs 13) to say “spare the rod and spoil the child”, but a beaten child cries and does not feel the love. *Better a small serving of vegetables with love than a fattened ox with hatred.*

It may be scriptural (Colossians 3) to say “wives submit to your husbands”, but an oppressed, frustrated and disempowered woman shakes and feels no

love. Better a small serving of vegetables with love than a fattened ox with hatred.

It may be scriptural (Exodus 20) to say “thou shalt not steal”, but if the door is locked and the key is thrown away, then the prisoner distorts, fades and dies and will never be recreated by love. *Better a small serving of vegetables with love than a fattened ox with hatred.* And later someone will say “if you don’t have love, your words are just a clanging cymbal”.

When Deuteronomy tells the people of Israel that they are to meditate on God’s law, to write it (as it were) on every part of their world and life, this is part of the first responsibility of faith to love God with heart, soul and strength. It is about loving God. What is missing? *Better a small serving of vegetables with love, than a fattened ox with hatred.* It is about loving God.

God creates. God listens. God hears the cries of the people. God opens the way to freedom. God sings. God shelters. God abides. God promises - and keeps the promise. God gives of self, to the point of sacrifice, the point of death. God heals. God forgives. God recreates. God gives thanks, breaks bread, and says “this is for you”. That is God.

And we are told to **love** God. Yes, quote the scripture, write it all over every part of your life - but only as part of your loving God. Love who God is. Love what God does. Treasure **that** in your heart. Write **that** on your world - and maybe milk and honey will come.

-ooOoo-

In closing; in Howick there grows an apple tree. In Ireland there stands a wayside pulpit. Somewhere in the world protesters are clashing. It *is* better, indeed I think, to have a small serving of vegetables with love, than to have a fatted ox with hatred. Love is the key, the measure, the goal. Don’t steal. Don’t sin. Don’t judge and throw away the key. Instead, love! Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

Love God! A moment of quiet.

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