

Sermon Archive 226

Sunday 16 December, 2018

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: Zephaniah 3: 14-20
Philippians 4: 4-7

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



“Don’t worry about anything, but in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.”

So, less of the anxiety that keeps to itself and achieves very little! And more of the articulating of our need, our longing! But of that articulating, is that something of a private conversation with a private God - or something done more in community? What might a community model look like, of making our requests known to God?

That the daughter of Zion might sing out loud, rejoicing with all her heart.

-ooOoo-

The daughter of Zion is singing in East Germany. Lutheran ministers, Christian Fuehrer and Christoph Wonneberger, ministered at the grand old St Nicholas Church in Leipzig. As was typical of Lutheran churches, a regular cycle of low-key daily services was being observed. Small groups of people (sometimes fewer than a dozen) gathered most days for evening prayer. (Let your requests be made to God, by prayer and supplication.) Slowly, something began to happen to the Monday evening congregation. Prayers for *peace* began to become a bit more prominent in the praying. People began to linger a while after the service, talking about things - things like freedom and justice. Cup of tea and some airing of questions. (Questions about shame, oppression, disaster, silencing of the voice.) As the people prayed to God and spoke to one another, something that felt like momentum began to build. Partially because the church was one of the few social institutions that the communist state allowed some freedom of speech, and so was a safe place for gathering, partially because there was in place an unspectacular tradition of gathering for prayer anyway, and perhaps partially because requests were being made to God, on 9 October 1989 over eight thousand people crammed into St Nicholas Church. At the end of the service, they

flowed out into the streets, carrying nothing but candles and placards. By the time they'd reached the railway station, it was a peaceful protest of over 70,000 people. Thirty years later, participants report that the atmosphere was tense. Other much smaller protests in other cities had all previously been met with police violence and crackdown. (Don't worry about anything; let your gentleness be known to everyone.) Indeed, on this occasion, since no misbehaviour occurred among the protesters, the riot police found no excuse to do anything other than to let the protest pass. "I will remove disaster from you. I will deal with all your oppressors at that time." Having prayed, having spoken to one another, the people found a voice. Of a critical night of the liberation of East Germany, the daughter of Zion is singing.

-ooOoo-

The daughter of Zion is singing in South Africa. During the Second World War, quite a lot of the urban workforce had gone away to serve overseas. Because work still needed to be done at home, there was a wave into the cities, from the country, of what then was called "non-white" workers. When the soldiers came home, fully expecting to take up again the jobs they'd left behind, they found all these non-white people flooding the workforce - competing very competitively for the jobs, since they were willing to work for wages that were hopelessly low. They also found accommodation under pressure. All these new people in town had to live somewhere, so the property market was under pressure - prices going through the roof. There had long been separate schooling for blacks and whites. There long had been non-universal suffrage. But now there came a concerted effort to apply the principles of separateness to all socio-political matters. It's interesting that in the general election of 1948, support for the until-then minor party, the Herenigde Nasionale Party, came from electorates where farming, mining, manufacturing industries were strong - not so much from the cities (cities described at the time as being the bolt-holes for liberals and communists). Early reforms by the new government included prohibitions on black employment, black housing, mixed marriage, shared public transport, the sharing of public facilities. This can be called "oppression", "disaster", "judgment".

From within the experience of oppression, disaster, judgment, a young Anglican priest began to pray for his country and people. At the early stages, the prayers were for a change of law - the dismantlement of an unjust system. And from his pulpit, the same God-given pulpit as stood in St Nicholas, Leipzig, he used the relative freedom of speech that he, as a Christian minister, had. He called apartheid "evil and un-Christian". He made his requests to God out loud in the hearing of the people. He wasn't doing too well letting his gentleness be known

to everyone, but he was good at supplication and request. When his first set of prayers seemed to have been answered, a second set formed. It became obvious that, though the apartheid legislation was over, the country and the people still were broken. If the people of South Africa were ever to be reconciled, to forgive and to be forgiven, then truth had to be spoken about the past - about its on-going effects on the present. He pushed for the healing machinery to be called not just “reconciliation”, but “truth and reconciliation”. People had to be allowed to tell their stories - “this is how it was for me”. These are my requests, my supplications, that I would make known to you, the people around me, and to my God.

In his recent book, “The Book of Forgiving”, Desmond Tutu wrote:

In South Africa, the logic of apartheid created enmity among the races. Some of the poisonous effects of that system still linger. But forgiveness has opened the door to a different future for us, one that is not bound by the logic of our past. Earlier this year I sat in the sun enjoying the delighted shrieks of a gaggle of seven-year-old girls celebrating my granddaughter’s birthday. They represented every race of our rainbow nation. Their future is not determined by the logic of apartheid. Race is not the basis upon which they will choose their friends, build their families, select their careers, or decide where to live. Their future is being charted by the logic of a new South Africa and the grace of forgiveness. The new South Africa is a country that is being created because, laying down the burdens of years of prejudice oppression brutality, and torture, some extraordinary people had the courage to forgive.

Let your requests be made. Find a voice. Speak your true story. And the daughter of Zion shall sing!

-ooOoo-

Shall the daughter of Zion sing in our world and time? Shall disaster be removed? Will oppression end? Will the lame and the outcast be gathered, brought home, healed and forgiven? Will shame be turned to praise?

I believe that the daughter of Zion shall not sing if we, people of faith and imagination, are silent. It is part of the church’s responsibility to articulate our supplications and requests. Where there is silence, where no request is made, where the voice of hope is not given expression, the daughter of Zion will never sing. Don’t let your hands grow weak. Don’t fall back in fear. But in everything, by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.

So says our scripture . . .

- Do we want more for our world than post-truth folly and squabbling? We must make our requests known.
- Do we want better for our young people than the murdering of O.E. tourists? We must make our requests known.
- Do we want journalist not to disappear permanently behind the locked doors of an embassy? We must make our requests known.
- Do we want no novichok on our doorknobs? We must make our requests known.
- Do we want more for our children than prejudice, hatred, selfishness? We must make our requests known.

Part of the way that the wrong things gain power in our world, is that the voice of request has gone weak. When nobody speaks, the status quo kind of settles in, beds down, becomes a stifled norm. When no dissatisfaction is articulated, a tacit permission is somehow given to what we do not want. When people give up the discipline of hope, seldom is there justice, progress, peace for the people.

But when people begin to win back the desire to speak - to speak from that dream of better things - to speak from that vision articulated by the prophets and preachers and believers, Zion's daughter stirs from her silence. Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart! And maybe, the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds.

Many a sermon from this pulpit has ended with the words "we keep a moment of quiet". Not today!

*Community of Christ,
who make the Cross your own,
live out your creed and risk your life
for God alone!*

With the daughter of Zion, we sing our song!

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