

## Sermon Archive 229

Sunday 20 January, 2019

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: Isaiah 62: 1-5  
John 2: 1-11

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



A four part sermon.

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Part One. The gospel of John is sometimes called the “book of signs”. It starts with the great prologue, in which John says “this human life that we have seen, is the coming out into full human view of the great, glorious creative force by which the whole thing was made. That which was from the very beginning, giving us life, has reached out to us, showed itself to us, given itself to us. God is at work. In this world. In this light. In this time. God is working.

It’s all said with great dramatic language, with high seriousness - the grammar of grandeur. Having made its great announcement, the gospel immediately changes gear - moves into a series of much smaller, quite personal vignettes, little pictures, of the signs - the events, deeds, the conversations through which the glory was spotted. Conversations with a woman by a well. Talks with a teacher in the middle of the night. The healing of a boy at a distance - a healing that wasn’t fully appreciated until the next day. The glory that is being revealed, is being revealed little by little, in sometimes almost imperceptible little clues. The penultimate sign might well be a huge ugly execution in a public place - something from which no member of the public could turn away - right in your face - but the earlier signs, including the first sign, are much more gentle. Here we go - - -

- A fellow human being brings me a glass of wine. Friendly, hospitable. Is that a sign that God at work?
- A fellow human being brings me wine, when I feared there was no wine. A relief, a pleasant surprise, a welcome escape from my embarrassment that I hadn’t provided enough. Is that a sign that God is at work?

- A fellow human being brings me a glass of wine, and it's good. In fact this wine might well make others think well of me. I've gone from being called "desolate" to being called "delight". My honour is restored - though I'm not sure how or why. Is that a sign that God is at work?
- A fellow human being puts out a rumour that something miraculous has just happened. Out there, beyond where I was (I was too busy organising the dishes), something beyond our understanding has occurred. Would that be a sign?

Well, probably not, because a close reading of the wedding at Cana, reveals the cute little detail that although the servants knew where the wine had come from, the wine steward had no idea. He who said "this wine is really good" is someone described as having been completely ignorant of the miracle. For him it's just the turning up of some quality wine. For him it's not an obvious sign. We're told, though, that this event caused the disciples to believe in Jesus. As God works, as the first few signs get missed by most, a small group notices and responds with faith. When God works, wonderful changes occur, some of which are seen, eliciting celebration and faith. Inside a jar, working with water, not being noticed - the hand of God is at work. The disciples believe it.

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Part Two - set some centuries before. O how the mighty have fallen - and fallen totally in public! The prophet speaks of the city - but of course he means the people. The city stands for the people, their identity, their reputation. As the world calls Jerusalem a failed city, an overthrown city, a sacked and embarrassed city, the stones of the city aren't crying. It's the people who cry. As the world gives nick-names to the city, it's the people who are being mocked. Your name is "forsaken". We will call you "desolation". We will punch, kick into touch, leave baby in the corner - your community, your hope, your pride is nothing. That's what has been said.

The historical realities behind why this has been said include a culture having been warned. The prophets saw the disaster coming, and they warned the city. But the city lacked the wisdom to listen - or the self-awareness to sense the truth. The city had been stubborn or foolish - that was the reality. Another reality was the very political reality of conquest. Another culture had come on in, taken away the power, stolen the glory, and exiled the people.

There's a small, down-at-heel remnant that the conquerors couldn't be bothered taking away - who wants to take away the poor and useless!?. The poor and useless are left to exist among the ruins. The reality was that all the strength and talent had been taken away. This people was, in utter reality, now a totally pathetic "left-over". Everyone saw it; everyone knew it; everyone said it. Your name is "forsaken". We will call you "desolation". That is reality.

But the prophet now is moved to speak. He speaks about what might happen in the hands of God - the working hands of a wonderful God. In the hand of the Lord, you shall be a crown of beauty. In the hand of your God, you shall be a royal diadem. In the hands of the working God, a restoration, a vindication is being formed - a new name is being given. "You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called 'My delight is in her' and your land shall be married."

The overturning of the demeaning nicknames. The taking of the land into marriage - I love you, I commit to you, I tell all the witnesses here assembled that all that I have I share with you, all that I am I give to you. For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, until her vindication shines out like the dawn. I will not be satisfied for a miracle to occur in a stone jar with no one noticing. I will make of this a sign that everyone will see. My delight. My miraculous change. By the hand of God, the working of God. O, that everyone would notice and see!

Back to the real historical situation. I don't know whether many people would have seen much. A few people returning from Babylon. A few people picking up the first few bricks and broken bits, and mumbling about a temple. A few others gathering for the reading of the old scriptures. People coming out of the corners. Doesn't look too much like a miracle - could it be one of those signs that are easy to miss? Working not with water - but with people. A miraculous change not in substance, but in spirit. People in the hands of God - seeing not merely what is (the harsh reality), but what could be. The wine steward will miss it - but the disciples will believe.

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Part Three. Two thirteen year old boys and a sixteen year old crash a stolen car into a tree in Blenheim Road. There is an explosion and police are relying on dental records now to work out who is who. The historical realities include many stolen vehicles, deeply established patterns of bad behaviour,

reckless disregard of public safety. “What is” was not pretty. An uncle of the sixteen year old tells the New Zealand Herald “Glen went with them because he wanted to protect them ... from getting into pursuits and fights, he was trying to keep them safe.” One of the thirteen year olds was in the care of Tamariki Oranga - had a team of people trying to steer him in good directions - not straight at a tree in Blenheim Road. I suspect that some people may harbour the view that the city is better off without these three citizens - because they were poor citizens. Forsaken. Desolate. There will be many apposite nicknames.

Do we believe that God works not just with water - but with people? Do we believe that the community of faith has a prophetic responsibility not just to see what is - but to look for what could be? Do we believe that the hand of God can be at work, even when we do not see it? (In the love of an uncle? In the case files of a social worker? In small signs of change that the wine steward completely misinterprets as non-miraculous?) And what, what do we understand is happening to this city, to this community, to this way that we form our people, as faith dares to describe us as being held in the hard-working hands of God?

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#### Part Four.

- A fellow human being brings me a glass of wine. Friendly, hospitable. Is that a sign?
- A fellow human being brings me wine, when I feared there was none. Relief, an escape from my embarrassment. Is that a sign?
- An uncle is kind and speaks some words from love; not “desolate” but “delight”. A new name – seeing something that others miss. Is that a sign?
- We gather on a Sunday morning, daring to believe that the world is in the hands of God. We wonder about “seeing what yet might be”. Is that a sign?

Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

We keep a moment of quiet.

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