

Sermon Archive 230

Sunday 27 January, 2019

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: Nehemiah 8: 1-3, 5-6, 8-10

Luke 4: 14-21

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Ezra and Nehemiah tell the people twice that today is a holy day. They don't mean a pious day, a sanctimonious day. They mean blessed, touched by the goodness of God. They mean beautiful - right - a day that is just the way it ought to be. A day for which humankind was made; a perfect day. In search of just such a day for the family of humanity, we listen for the Word of God.

-ooOoo-

On the holy day the people gather; they come together. Goodness knows, it's easy for people to go their own separate ways, to live their private lives, speak their own private language. It's easy to build the high fence, to stretch out the great wall. It's easy to define yourself as an autonomous individual first and put on hold the unanswered question "Am I my brother's keeper?" It's easy to give into the taxonomy of "us and them", and to go out into battle against the them - the "not like us" others who clutter up my space. Even when it comes to leaving your lover, there must be at least fifty ways.

But on the holy day, when things are being made holy, the people come together; they assemble in one place. On this day there is true public space. There is the sharing of time, the being together. Of course there are times when an assembled people can be a powerful thing - particularly when they're **demanding** one thing, **saying** one saying, **marching** in one direction. But perhaps, within a world where the culture is a culture of individualism and isolation, for any group to come together freely, simply to be in company, we are seeing something holy - something that is the way it ought to be. ["It is not good for the human being to be alone; I will make him a helper."] The people gather; the day is holy.

-ooOoo-

On the holy day, the people listen - from early in the morning, right through to the noon of the day, they listen. It is an attentive listening - a listening with the hope of understanding. And as they listen, what do they hear? They hear their old deep stories. Once upon a time God put lights in the sky and trees on the land. Once upon a time an old man heard a voice calling him onto a journey - "Abraham come and follow me!" Once upon a time a people were led through parted oceans because heaven wanted them to be free. Once upon a time . . . They hear their own stories - stories about a promise made in love - stories daring to weave into hope a gentle conviction that they are treasured, cherished, embraced.

Goodness knows, it's easy to fall into believing that it's random, that it's unimportant. It's easy to fall into despising one's own insignificance. It's easy to refuse to listen at all - talk to the hand! Is there, though, a God who says "you are my child; with you I am well pleased"? Is there a God who brings good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind? Is there a God who proclaims that today is a day of favour? To affirm, not to condemn. To bless, not to curse. To free, not to bind. To favour, not to withhold.

On the holy day, when things are being made holy, the people listen - listen carefully. And they hear the story of their having been chosen, having been called, having been companioned by compassion. On the holy day, the people are reassured by the gentle, gentling Word.

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On the holy day, the people weep. Is there something in the old deep stories that provokes a tear? Is there something in the way that all the hope and promise and love sits next to their real experience, that lets out a cry?

We don't know why they cry. Maybe it's just the accumulated pain of many years of exile. Maybe they're crying for all that didn't come to be. Maybe they're crying because they feel how far they themselves had drifted from their original promise - like the world has suffered some terrible loss of innocence. Maybe they cry out of relief that at long last now they're home. Whatever! When we are told that boys don't cry, and that crying is weakness, when we are told that the key is just pulling yourself together, when we are told that "feeling" is dangerous, on the holy day, the people just cry. Feel. Grieve. Acknowledge sorrow. Pain is real. On the holy day, this finds expression. On the holy day, the people cry. We are honest about how it feels.

-ooOoo-

On the holy day, the priest declares an end to the time of mourning. The people, now that they have cried, are given permission to move on, to live again.

*He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.'*

In fact, the people are given instructions: they are instructed to get on out there, eating the fat, drinking the wine that is sweet. Celebrate the joyful, enjoy the happy! Embrace the idea of "life as a party". Make the most of the goodness that has been given to you. For goodness sake, don't be guilty about God-given pleasures. Don't allow yourself to become some frowning Presbyterian in a black-cassocked corner of gloom. Light the peace candle, sing the rollicking hymn. Use the bone china and the raise the crystal glasses. After "Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy", there comes the "I declare to you that you are forgiven, and you are free - THANKS BE TO GOD".

Lest we think that a holy people on a holy day need to be hushed and sombre, hear this good news: the day becomes holy as people are given permission, nay **instruction**, to smile.

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On the holy day, amid the celebration of goodness, there's a gentle, quiet reminder. Don't forget about those who don't have good food. Make provision for them. For there would, indeed, be something wrong if the party of my life cast a contrast on the empty table of my sister or brother. Celebration can become selfishness. Blindness to the state of the other is not holy. Indeed, did not some prophet sometime say that sight was to be given to the blind - that we might see? To notice. To care. To share.

The prevailing culture might say "you reap what you sow". It might say hand-outs perpetuate dependency. It might say "they are the architects of their

own poverty". The world often says such things. But when a basket of food is dedicated in faith, when it is given to a food bank, to be given to others with no strings attached, is the day becoming holy? When money is given, not just to pay the minister and power bills, but also to provide company for the lonely, is not the day becoming holy? When the life well lived and properly enjoyed is shared, when good news is not only *spoken* to the poor, but *put into the hands* of the poor - is not that the way things ought to be? Not pious; not sanctimonious - but blessed, touched by the goodness of God. Beautiful - gracious and decent - generous. The day is becoming holy.

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On the holy day, this last thing is hard for the people to describe. The closest they can get to describing it is that they have a new strength. Somehow the holy day has made them strong. Yes, you could say that crying, being vulnerable, could reveal you as weak. You could say that giving away your food and money could put you in a weaker position. You could say that having to accommodate the other, rather than to live just for yourself, could put you at disadvantage. But they don't feel disadvantaged at all. In fact, they feel strong. They live not with a sense of resentment. They live with a sense of joy. They live not with a sense of diminished self - but with a deeper heart. Learning from the holy is like standing on a rock, having a foundation. It is stable, it is true, it is strong. "Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength. This day is holy to our God".

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Long ago Ezra and Nehemiah told the people twice that that day was a holy day. They didn't mean a pious day, a sanctimonious day. They meant blessed, touched by the goodness of God. They meant beautiful - right - a day that is just the way it ought to be. A day for which the human being was made.

What of today, this day? What of us - this gathered people? What of our capacity to listen? What of the tears that we cry? What of the goodness we share? What of the mysterious strength we sense in moments of faith? What of whom we are being enabled to be? Is today to be a holy day? Today, has this scripture been fulfilled in our hearing?

We keep a moment of quiet.

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