

Sermon Archive 231

Sunday 3 February, 2019

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Genesis 1:26 - 2:3

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



It made sense to the early Christians to write their story in Greek. Greek was the language of commerce and culture, spoken in all of the places where the new faith was being established. Telling the Christian story in Greek made sense when one of your big goals was to convert people who spoke Greek. So a lot of early Christian thought and expression was done in Greek. To that extent Greek words, Greek concepts, enabled and constrained early Christian concepts. The Greek word for “peace” was “eirene” - and its basic meaning, the bundle of connotations and associations it carried, was “absence of war”. So peace, for the first generations of non-Jewish converts, was about absence - no war, no violence, no conflict, no strife.

On another linguistic plane all together, from a different culture, shaping a different world of thought and expression, was the old Hebrew word “shalom”. Shalom is full, not empty; it is present, not absent. As the Jews meet one another, they say “shalom aleichem”- peace be with you. They give it to one another. Shalom.

-ooOoo-

On the first day, God made light. We are told that the light was good. We’re not told that God saw that it was good - just that it was good. On the second day God made the sky. Displeasing though it may be to meteorologists and astronauts, the sky isn’t as good. The second day is a standout in that respect. On the third day, sea and land are good, and God notices that they are. Later in the day God makes vegetation - seeds and fruit, and that is also declared to be good. On the fourth day, God turns back to that rather empty work of the second day – the sky - and hangs a few ornaments in it: twinkling stars, the soft-shining moon, the bright dazzling sun - and sees that now it’s good. (It wasn’t quite finished before!) On the fifth day, God fills two parts of the creation with living creatures - birds for the sky, and fish for the sea - creatures perfectly designed for both those domains. And God saw that it was good - so good in

fact that God instructs the creatures to make more of themselves - regeneration, life giving life to life. On the sixth day God commands the earth to join the sea and the sky in bringing forth from itself more life - wild animals, cattle and creeping things - all manner of living things. And God saw that it was good. Then later in the day, came the human being - created in a special sacred image - reflecting the nature of the creating One. God counsels these newly created things on how to care for the creation - how to live, how to sustain, how to receive and enjoy it. Late on the sixth day God looks at the whole thing together, and notices it. And this time it's not called simply "good". This time it's called "very good". There is something about the **whole thing together**, with its delicate balance, it's perfect harmonies, it's beauty of inner integrity and respectful totality that moves it into the realm of the very good. That the very good whole may be noticed, that its wholeness may be celebrated, God makes an extra day, free from labour, freed for simple grateful beholding. On that day, the narrator says "God finished the work that he had done, and rested".

It is an image of a beautiful work completed. Though it has only just begun, it is finished. It is as it is meant to be. It is complete. Shalom aleichem. Shalom.

In the Greek language, forming the way that Greek people think and speak and work is eirene - the absence of strife. In the Hebrew language, forming a deeper, more full calling to peace, there is shalom - balance, totality, wholeness, well being, things perfectly placed, a creation living well, bringing a rested joy and satisfaction to its beholder.

On the way to joining God in that rested joy and satisfaction, what is the challenge, the worshipful task of the first day? Should light fail, what might make for light? "Let there be light; let there be understanding". I don't understand you. I don't get what drives you. Your differences confuse me; so I run from them, and imagine, instead of you, some stereotype of you - a parody. It's easier to make fun, to mock, to de-personalise, than it is to seek light - to see in the light the lines of your face, the nuances of your body language, the textures of your expression. So spear chucker, immigrant, poofter, tree-hugger, Trump supporter, criminal, dole-bludger. Shalom aleichem; shalom. Seek light, seek understanding, seek right relationship; **this** is the work, the world, the people, of peace.

On the way to joining God in the rested joy and satisfaction, what is the

challenge, the worshipful task of the second day? Should the sky fail, what might make for the great space above us? The human need for space, for horizon, for that which we cannot touch, the great unknown . . . Should **that** fail, and our world should be deprived of distance, mystery, the untouchable, we could become so very arrogant - there is nothing we cannot reach. We could become very unimaginative, never wondering about the things too distant easily to see. We could cease ever to look up - to think about how big it all is. **Or**, we could cause the sky to fail in a much more physical way by filling it with greenhouse gases, so the whole thing cooks and the glaciers melt and sea levels rise - till there are heatwaves and hurricanes - and the West Coast District Council's calls for proof seem sensible and strange. Shalom aleichem; shalom! To care for that sky - for all that it does and stands for and inspires . . . That is the work, the world, the people of peace.

On the way to joining God in the rested joy and satisfaction, what is the challenge, the worshipful task of the third day? Sea, land and vegetation. Should the sea, land and vegetation fail, what is shalom? Given that the vegetation is food, full of seed and fruit, perhaps shalom is making sure that no creature is hungry. That every creature continues to have what it needs to live and grow, and indeed to be fruitful, to perpetuate life, to feed life from its own life. A well in a village. Affordable, available AIDS medication in a ravaged population. Food in a food bank. The removal of GST from basic food stuffs? Shalom aleichem, shalom! This is the work, the world, the people, of peace.

On the way to joining God in rest and satisfaction, what is the challenge of the fourth day? The sun, the moon, the stars make the rather empty sky a new kind of beautiful. Beauty where once it was simply plain. A painter fills a canvas with a scene. A musician breaks the silence with song. A New York hairdresser gives free cuts to the homeless - "you're looking good now" - given dignity of appearance. A parent puts a child's drawing on the fridge. Someone says "I love you" with a rhyming couplet. This isn't absence - this is putting things in place. This is creative - the making more beautiful of the world - the noticing of that which is lovely. Open your eyes, drink deeply of the blessing you almost didn't see. Shalom aleichem, shalom. This is the work, the world, the people, of peace.

On the way to joining God in rest and satisfaction, what is the challenge of the fifth day? Birds and fish - the first living, breathing, flying, swimming, multiplying creatures within the order. To hallow life. To choose life. To defend life. To let life fly when it can. To let life swim when it needs to. To preserve the diversity, to delight in the different and the strange. Perhaps to "let be" - or to cheer when it soars. Shalom aleichem, shalom. This is the work, the world, the people, of peace.

On the sixth day, what is the challenge? It is to see how it all fits together - how it lives well together - how it was made so that every part of it forms the wonder of the whole. It is respect for its integrity, harmony. So it's going to be about treading lightly, making room for every part. It's going to be about noticing that it's not just good, but very good - that extra quality of goodness coming when it's all brought together, finished, made right. This is no absence - this is shalom. Shalom aleichem, shalom.

On the seventh day, we dare not speak of challenge, of work. There is plenty of work to be done - for as any cynic might say of the perfected work of the sixth day, "how long's that going to last?" Indeed, there's plenty to do, to restore, to re-create and co-create. But part of God's shalom is joining God in the resting, in the simple beholding, in the grateful receiving of what has been made. So pray. Be still. Take a pause, and simply just be with your God. Light a candle, keep a silence; rest that spirit. The God of peace is here. Shalom aleichem, shalom, shalom.

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It made sense to the early Christians to write their story in Greek. "Eirene" - the absence of war". On another linguistic plane all together, from a different culture, shaping a different world of thought, expression, vision and hope, is "shalom". Full, not empty; present, not absent - calling into being a people of peace. Shalom aleichem, shalom.

So may it be. Amen.

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