

## Sermon Archive 232

Sunday 10 February, 2019

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: Colossians 1: 15-20  
Matthew 5: 1-12

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



In last week's sermon, we sat a while in paradise. We sat silently and gratefully, nestled like a child into the resting companionship of God. The creating was completed - and we beheld it. Everything was perfect. There was harmony, balance, wholeness. God wasn't the only one to see that it was good. The people of peace caught a vision. It was very good indeed. Shalom aleichem, shalom, shalom - peace.

Into the sermon then, though, came this little sentence: "as any cynic might say of the perfected work of the sixth day, 'how long's that going to last?'"

Well, as the creation story tells it, the answer is "not very long" - about one generation. The first child born to the blessed and brand new human family, a person called Cain, becomes jealous of his younger sibling, rises up in anger, and kills him.

Alas, any deep Christian understanding of peace has to contend with that. We think of peace, speak of peace, pray for peace, work for peace, within the realities of conflict and violence. Making peace is going to be a costly business. "Blessed are the peace-makers"; they might well be called "children of God", but it's going to be hard.

-ooOoo-

The creation story seeks to describe our condition. Lest we think that the violence between Cain and his brother is just literature, here are three true stories about Matthew and violence.

I was, as a child, quite a soft and gentle little thing. I played with my sister; I liked making things out of empty cardboard boxes. I had a small collection of well-loved soft toys that were as real to me in terms of friendship as any

velveteen rabbit. Those who stereotype children according to sibling order would have stereotyped me as the typical middle child - kind of accommodating, a good compromiser. Growing up in a household that lacked any significant conflict, violence was just not on my radar.

I am fourteen years old. I am standing outside Room 27B, in the downstairs corridor of an old Nelson block, waiting for the science teacher to arrive, to open up the lab and let us in for our class. We're going to learn about chemistry, or reactions; or maybe it's going to be about biology - I can't remember. What I do remember is that there's this new boy. I think his name was Lewis. We've just had the morning break and he's been annoying me - not troubling me, not directing anything at me. I'm not in his sights. But he's being a smart "rectum". I can't remember what the trigger was, but suddenly I have shoved him, hard against the wall. He bounces a bit off the wall. He looks scared. He goes away.

As I said, we were waiting for the teacher. No staff member was present - so I never was called to account for what I did. Nor was I ever led through any reflective process - to explore what had happened - from whence had come this sudden explosion. It all went pretty unanalyzed. I am relieved to be able to say that that was the only time I have ever struck another human being. But I guess you could say that I was fourteen when I realized that I was capable of doing so. I, like any other person, was capable of violence.

The second story is set, I think, in the same year. In those days Phys Ed. classes were combined events. Maybe it was because there were lots of kids and only one gymnasium. I'm not sure. But certainly my form class and another form class were in the changing rooms after a class, getting dressed for the rest of the day. Again, there were no adults around - the place is dark, concrete block and smelly. Doing my own thing, putting back on my clothes (who toldest thee that thou wast naked - it's that story of humanity again - our vulnerability, our softness), I become aware, just over there, that a stranger from the other class is getting in the face of Paul. He's a big guy. He punches Paul in the face - and Paul will wear a black eye for the next couple of weeks.

I have no idea what the school did in response. It can't have failed to notice the bruises. Though the act was in secret, the result was plain to see in public. What I certainly know, though, is the sound the punch made. It sounded just like punches sounded in cowboy movies. Crack. Snap. Whack. I couldn't believe that it sounded like that. I felt frightened. I wanted to get away.

The third story is set many years later, when I am living in Sydney. I am driving my car down to the Woolworths supermarket in Double Bay. Coming down New South Head Road, on the corner of Manning Road, I see a couple - a man and a woman. He seems to be grappling with her, and she appears to be resisting. I try, for an instant, not to see what I'm seeing. But it's as obvious as a black eye on the face of Paul. I stop my car, shout out across the road. I can't remember what I shout, but it does the trick. He tells me that his wife is really, really drunk, and he's trying stop her walking out onto the road. He has stopped grappling, and she's just standing there - maybe looking embarrassed. Do I believe what he has told me? I don't know - but the fight has stopped. As I drive away, off to do my shopping, I notice that I am shaking.

Three true stories about Matthew and violence. There is violence in us. Violence is real and scary. And dealing with violence involves risk. You can't deal with it remotely. Shalom is the goal - beautiful, restful beholding of everything being perfectly placed. But shalom must be sought from within the reality of violence. It's going to be costly.

-ooOoo-

If you go into a Catholic church, chances are you are going to see a crucifix. Probably right at the front, in the centre, lifted high so the view of it can't be obscured, there will be the image of a man nailed to a cross. We Protestants have chosen not to adorn our churches in quite that way - but for most Christian communities the decision has been made to place front and centre, the image of someone who's suffered violence. And when Paul writes to the Colossians, describing the image of the invisible God (the God whom we are beginning to understand), he talks about reconciliation (the putting right of dislocated, broken things) as making peace through the blood of the cross. There is something central to Paul's understanding of God, Paul's honesty about the work of the God of shalom, that has to do with blood. Taking on the violence, losing to the violence, testifying from our own experience of violence, dying then rising above the violence, is part of the story of the making of peace.

In a couple of weeks we will announce to the world that Knox Church is a place of peace. We'll claim that we're going to allow our understanding of peace form who we are as a community. Part of that will certainly be about the shalom of last week's sermon. Wholeness, balance, harmony, restful,

worshipful beholding of goodness that has been given. But part of it also is going to have to be about engagement with the violence of our world. What might that mean? Would it mean standing with the women's refuges of Christchurch? Would it mean supporting those who work to rehabilitate violent young offenders? Would it mean making sure that our children are taught in school the truth about the violence that has been part of our nation's formation? (2154 Maori and 745 Pakeha in the New Zealand Wars [1845-1872]; homemade violence on our own land. No stranger intruded to do those numbers.) Would it mean asking the government to investigate honestly what happened in Afghanistan in August of 2010? (Were we really there making peace?) Would it mean asking our male politicians please not to participate in charity boxing matches? Would it mean sorting out whether rodeo is an entertainment or an obscenity? Would it mean saying to our neighbours, when we hear the crashing and shouting, "that's not OK"? Would it mean asking questions about Paul's black eye? Would it mean putting ourselves in between Paul and his puncher?

We don't yet know what peace-making will mean for us, as a community. But if it means any of these sorts of things, then we will learn very quickly that peace is not a cheap trinket. It is a costly treasure - with sharp edges. Cain kills Abel, there's a fight in the changing rooms. Blessed are the peacemakers who will be called "children of God". Who's that on the cross - could it possibly be one of the children of God? There's blood on that cross - somehow making for peace.

-ooOoo-

I was, as a child, quite a soft and gentle little thing. I played with my sister; I liked making things out of empty cardboard boxes. I had a small collection of well-loved soft toys. I pushed Lewis into a wall - and he ran from me, scared. Shalom is the goal - and we seek it from here.

A moment of quiet.

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