

## Sermon Archive 233

Sunday 24 February, 2019

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: Deuteronomy 34: 1-8

Romans 12: 9-21

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



*There are places I'll remember  
All my life, though some have changed  
Some forever, not for better  
Some have gone and some remain  
All these places have their moments  
With lovers and friends I still can recall  
Some are dead and some are living  
In my life, I've loved them all*

*Though I know I'll never lose affection  
For people and things that went before  
I know I'll often stop and think about them  
In my life, I love you more.*

From Lennon and McCartney's "In my life", I'm going to remove the romantic lines - "I love you more". And that will leave us with a simple text about someone remembering his or her life with deep affection - all the people who came and went from it - the places and faces held in sincere endearment - given to us by grace, precious.

This sermon has 4 parts:

- A reflection on a friendship
- Moses remembered
- Paul aims low
- The reconciled life

### **Part One: a reflection on a friendship**

Some weeks ago, I spoke about a man called Andaman. I spoke about our being friends - and about how one day the friendship came to an end. I spoke about how I hadn't spoken to him for eight years now. The ending of that friendship didn't loom

terribly large in my life - but obviously it remained tucked away in the heart or mind - until church called it forth. As I spoke publically of the ending of a friendship, I suddenly became aware of a sadness in the room. It felt to me like you, the people given to me by grace, were sad that I had lost a friend. That's why later, on the night of the day on which I spoke, I sent my absent friend a message. When I was able to tell you later that Andaman and I had corresponded, and that we had each wished the other well, there was, in the room, a feeling of goodness. Something had been mended. And although the friendship will never really be what it was, there is now a sense of peace. It was good to talk.

*"There are places I'll remember all my life, though some have changed  
Some forever, not for better, some have gone and some remain  
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Some are dead and some are living:  
In my life, I've loved them all.*

There are other friendships that have not ended - but have lasted for a very long time. These are the people of whom you might say "they've always been there". Those who remember what we were like when we were much younger - sillier or more ambitious. Those who know us well. People in whose presence we don't feel we need to talk too much - or people whose company gives us much to say, or sing, or play. People who are OK with who we are - not needing to change who we are - not impatient with who we are - but at peace with who we are.

*Though I know I'll never lose affection for people and things that went before,  
I know I'll often stop and think about them; in my life, I love you more".*

The end of Part One.

## **Part Two: Moses remembered**

Moses had a temper. Where are the tablets upon which he wrote the commandments? Nowhere. He destroyed them in a fit of anger. Moses also was a murderer. Early in his adulthood he'd attacked and killed an Egyptian, hidden the body, tried to cover it up. Moses had been roundly criticised by his people for having taken them out into the desert without thinking through the logistics of survival. "Why did you bring us out to die in the desert?" they'd said. Moses was gutless when God called him to confront the authorities: "I don't think so" he'd said. Further, Moses set the goal of reaching the promised land, but he didn't get there. If failing to achieve the primary goal is a criterion for failure, Moses was a failure.

Yet, when he dies, and is buried, the people **cry**. They stop their onward march to honour him, and to describe him as a lively "one off". It would seem that there has been something in their walking together that has brought them together - that has

not air-brushed him, but has certainly enabled them to look beyond the many things that could have got in the way. Walking with God, looking towards the freedom, has created friendship, love (maybe), and now, at the Lord's command, and the departure of his breath, loss. Imperfect creatures have journeyed, grown together, such that now they cry at what has ended.

*All these places have their moments, with lovers and friends I still can recall, some are dead and some are living, In my life, I've loved them all*

Part of the thing is that things end. People and places . . . lovers and friends . . . some are living, but some have come to an end.

I don't like it when things end. I don't like it when people depart. I hate it when gaps appear and I can't plug reasons into the cracks to mend the break. The old philosopher, Heraclitus, told us that change is ubiquitous, unavoidable. You can't step into the same river twice. All is shifting, moving along, departing. That's true, but I find it hard to be at peace with loss. **But** change, but parting, but loss, is part of the story that is told. The people of Israel have to let go of Moses, and they cry. That God gives time for mourning, that crying is part of the experience of the still-forming people of God, that the Deuteronomist includes this as part of the story - is this not also part of God's gifting, over time, of peace? Who am I? Who are you? What do we do with our loss of one another?

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The end of Part Two.

### **Part Three: Paul aims low**

The apostle Paul, whose life was hijacked by the Christ whom he had been persecuting, became like the Christ, in that his life was now oriented around the creation of community. Neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free. Neither male nor female, but one new community - come together across all manner of difference and ousted enmity.

Mind you, the ousting of enmity was very much a work in progress. As you read Paul's story, sometimes in between the lines, and sometimes right across the headlines, there are reports of fractures, fissures, great seismic rips on the social landscape. On one mission journey he pals up with Barnabas. On the next they have to go their separate ways because Barnabas wants to bring along someone called Mark. In Corinth there are factions. There are riots in Thessalonica and Ephesus. His opening sentences to his community in Galatia is "I'm astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ". In a

letter to Timothy, Paul writes “Do your best to come to me soon, for Demas, in love with the present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica; Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me”. People scatter at every chance, and “unity in Christ” is looking totally like a pipe dream.

Given that it was Paul’s task to take a Hebrew gospel into a Greek fashioned world, you’d expect a degree of cultural misunderstanding. But even so! All the conflict! I’m inclined to think that Paul himself probably contributed to it. Anyone who describes himself as tormented by a thorn in his flesh, and who calls his own body “this body of death”, and who says “nothing good dwells within me”, is fairly likely to bring negativity into the world.

Yet his plea to the Christians in Rome, is “if it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all”. Supremely world-worn, with a low target, riven with disclaimers (“if possible”, “so far as it depends on you”), he says just try to live at peace.

Dealing with what we can and cannot do, we hear the call to peace.

*There are places I'll remember all my life, though some have changed; some forever, **not for better**, some have gone and some remain. **All these places have their moments** . . . In my life, I've loved them all.* End of Part Three.

#### **A very short Part 4: The reconciled life**

We don’t control life. We contribute to it. So far as it depends on us, if at all possible, we seek to live at peace.

- Peace with who we are.
- Peace with those who have loved or befriended us, and then become part of our experience of loss.
- Peace with what we can do and peace with what we can’t.
- Peace with the call that has been spoken over our community to walk with the great companion - who brings back the line “I love you more”.

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Beyond the complex tangle of self and love and loss, comes the voice of God: “I love you more”. A moment of quiet.

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