

## Sermon Archive 234

Sunday 3 March, 2019

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Psalm 122

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Let's say that *you've* grown up in Bethlehem. That's where your people are, and where most of your early nurturing has happened. That's where you have aunts and uncles, and where you knew your kindy teacher. The hills, the houses, the shape and sound of the little town of Bethlehem. All the while that you were growing up, because of God, you knew of this special other place where you knew one day you would visit. It had a strange claim on you - a connection deeper than the place that formed you. ("And there's another country I've heard of long ago, most dear to them that love her, most great to them that know.") The beautiful city - where I guess you'd always been told your real heart ought to lie. That's you in Bethlehem - thinking and feeling about that other place.

Let's say that *I've* grown up in Nazareth. That's where my people are, and where most of my early nurturing has happened. It's where I have aunts and uncles, and where my kindy teacher was Mrs Harvey. The streets, the wells, the market place. I know these places. It's nowhere near your place of Bethlehem. You and I might never have met. Yet, all the while I've grown up, because of God, I heard of this special other place where one day I would visit. A beautiful city - where my old folk told me my real heart lies.

You from your town, me from mine: we're glad when we hear the call: "Let us go to the house of the Lord". Off to this so-far unvisited but shared place we go. Do you think, when we get there, we might just meet? And do you think that when we get home again, each to our own place, we might find ourselves remembering one another, what we've shared, and feeling, somehow, that something about life now is different? Bethlehem, Nazareth, Christchurch; something now is different . . .

-ooOoo-

It's pretty well agreed that Psalm 122 presents the experience of a pilgrim - someone who's come from out of town to participate in a religious festival. In Islam, it's the duty of every adult male to go to Mecca at least once in his life - to be there, to be part of the greater gathering. There's a feel of commitment, fulfilment, being swept together in some great whirl, being called into the right place.

Similarly here, for this Jewish pilgrim, now he stands within the gates of his special place. His feet are on that ground. Physical, visceral, actual. He's there. And being there, he meets the tribes that are there with him - come from other places of the family - other corners of his greater belonging (Bethlehem, Nazareth, Christchurch) - all those present also seeking, travelling, coming to the house. He finds in this place a sense of the thrones of judgement - some sense of right and wrong - some compass for his life. He also finds some link to David, the man who gave his nation a deepest sense of pride. He loves the place, O God, not only within which God's honour dwells, but also within which he meets his extended family. Turangawaewae, belonging, my people, my place - all one in this God who calls us into the house. Our feet are standing within these gates - a city that is bound firmly together - a new togetherness.

Well, as you know, you can't spend all your life on a religious retreat. Sooner or later you need to go back home to Bethlehem, to Nazareth, to Christchurch. You need to return to the regular cycles by which we live: working, cooking, cleaning the house, mowing the lawn, shredding the disappointment, writing the sermon. Life calls us back to its regular, ordinary things.

But to his task of ordinary life, to the regular living of the day, the psalmist goes back with this memory of having been made glad in God's house. The psalmist goes back with a sense of something having been bound firmly together. The psalmist goes back with a sense of many tribes having met at the point of something sacred. And this glad remembering seems to set the shape for what he's now going to pray.

I suppose he'll pray for his aunts and uncles. He's always done that, and it's good that he has. I suppose he'll pray for the comings and goings of Bethlehem, the place where he lives. I suppose he'll pray all the usual things

we pray for, from and about our neighbourhood. After all, it's from within our neighbourhood that we see the world and form our longings - the immediate, the close. But now, also, alongside his old and natural prayers, he's going to pray for the peace of that other place - peace for the shared place - peace for the place where happened the great gathering of the tribes - the swirling together of others he does not know but among whom he belongs. Peace for the deeper connection he now feels he shares with those from other places. "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem" he sings. "Peace be within those walls." "For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say 'Peace be within you'."

We have spent this month exploring the theme of peace. We come to the end of the month with a psalm - within which someone finds himself praying for the peace of a city. It is interesting that the city for which he prays peace is the city where the peoples have gathered. It is interesting that he says, even though he's beguiled by the towers, the gates, the physical reality of the place, that his prayers are for the sake of his relatives and friends. "For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say 'Peace be within you'. This prayer for the peace of a city is a prayer for the sake of other people. Remembering the great gathering together of strangers into one house, he prays for the peace of the place that stages that.

Are there people you do not know, but among whom you belong? Is there something beyond us, not made by us, but given to us, that makes us family? Is your life (in all its self-containment and familiar boundaries) a tribe called to gather with the other tribes - called to come into one house?

I wonder, as we come to the end of our time of thinking about peace, whether prayer for the sake of the other, prayer for the strangers, the ones we almost met, or met and forgot, prayer affirming the basic belonging together of humankind, mightn't be a key to the making of peace. I *could* pray for my own house. I could build my wall around my garden and down my border. I could pray solely for my own interests. But here, a psalmist prays for the sake of others. Here a psalmist prays peace for the gathering of the people. Peace for the other. Peace for the

stranger. Peace for the meeting of people who are just beginning to realise that they are one.

I suspect that one of the keys to peace for our world is the capacity to pray for the other. It is the capacity to see that we are one - or to hope that we might be one - or to work that we might be one. No, I'm not one with the Muslim. No, I'm not one with the American Republican. No, I'm not one with the gay. No, I'm not one with the displaced person. No, I'm not one with the person who doesn't speak English. No, I'm not one with the person who's frightened of me. No, I'm not one with the man lying on the footpath in Evelyn Couzins Avenue. No, I'm not one with the sickness beneficiary who's soaking up my taxes.

If we keep saying "no", if we keep not praying for the other, no peace will come. We can understand what the Hebrews said about Shalom. We can admit the "blood on the cross" cost of dealing with the violence. We can pursue with all piety the goal of inner peace. We can try to be at peace with who we are and what we've lost. But if we don't care for the other, if we don't hold first the sake of the other, if we don't pray for the peace of the stage upon which the people meet and become one, then peace will only ever just be a word.

Indeed, pray for the other. Live for the other. Give of self to the other. For the sake of the other, I will say "peace be within you".

-ooOoo-

You've grown up in Bethlehem. That's where your people are, and where most of your early nurturing has happened. That's where you have aunts and uncles, and where you knew your kindy teacher. The hills, the houses, the shape and sound of the little town. All the while that you were growing up, because of God, you knew of this special other place that will form you.

Peace be to that place. The sake of the other . . .

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