

Sermon Archive 237

Sunday 24 March, 2019

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Genesis 15: 1-12, 17-18

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Pre-sermon: two little thoughts.

When I was ten years old I was chosen by some Arbour Day classroom process to plant a native tree, for my class group, on a bank out by the staff car park. The school groundskeeper had done the lion's share of the job by digging the hole. I took the little rimu tree, popped it in the hole and spaded some soil around its roots. I kept an eye on the tree for the rest of the year and watered it. It grew. It took practically no time at all to become taller than me. If it lives as long as most rimu naturally do, it will still be there six hundred years from now. Something that I touched, that I helped, that I watered, will be there long after I have gone. I have contributed to something long lasting. That feels good. Legacy. I suppose it's possible, though, that the staff numbers at the school might expand. Everything in Auckland seems to expand. And it's possible that greater numbers of teachers might require greater numbers of parking spaces. It's possible that my tree may hear the sound of a chainsaw and wonder what this awful tearing feeling is at its trunk. Gone. No more. The end.

Second thought. Johann Rudolf Ahle was born in Mühlhausen in 1625. He studied theology at Erfurt University. Little is known about his musical education, but he became known as an organist while at university. With his studies completed, he returned home to Mühlhausen, where he played the organ at the local church, St Blasius. He wrote quite a lot of organ music, but most of it's been lost. He and his wife, Anna, had a son, also named "Johann" - Johann Georg - who inherited not just a name but also an interest in playing the organ. Johann the elder, became mayor of Mühlhausen late in his life. Nothing much of note happened during his short time as mayor. He died and was buried in town where he'd been born 48 years earlier. He did not have a long life. Three hundred and forty six years after he left us, the congregation

of Knox Church sang one of his hymn tunes. The hymn tune hasn't lasted as long as an average rimu tree yet, but Johann Ahle contributed to something that outlasted him. Legacy? We may, of course, one day put our hymn books on the shelf. Dust may gather and the closing G Major chord may fade. Johann who? Gone. No more. The end. But for the moment there's a tune.

-ooOoo-

Abraham is one of those toweringly significant figures of faith. Whether you're Christian, Jewish or Muslim, he's the one your religion traces itself back to in terms of what it means to be a person of faith. His story begins when, prompted by God, he sets out on a journey. Abraham is a journeyman and faith is a journey. From the start, he's described as doing extremely well at life. His wife is beautiful, and he is rich - dripping with silver and gold. For a man on a journey, he's not exactly travelling light - in his train he has slaves to spare, servants and livestock coming out his ears. The Abraham entourage is quite a show - moving by stages through the Negeb. It's interesting to observe that for the first few chapters of his story, Abraham quite often builds altars "to the Lord" - at places where something significant has happened. He builds an altar at Shechem. He builds an altar at Bethel. He builds an altar at Hebron. Maybe this altar building is an act of devotion - a kind of "thank you" to the God of the journey - an offering to God. Or maybe it's a kind of memorialising of things - leaving reminders, signs, for those who will follow, come later. A tree by a carpark, a hymn tune in a service - little self-outlasting contributions to the inheritors. If Abraham's the quintessential figure of faith (the "Father of Faith"), then part of faith is marking steps along the way with altars to the Lord. Devotion now, or legacy later? Walking the journey, living the story - leaving something behind us.

But now it gets dark. As the sun goes down, and as a deep sleep falls upon Abram, a deep and terrifying darkness sets in. Abram, the Father of Faith, is struggling. He makes the point to his God that though he has much, though his household machine is great, he has no one to give it to. There is no heir. What he has built (his altar to the Lord) will be thrown like a left-over to one of his slaves. There is no continuation, no next generation; what has been built will be gone - no more - the end.

I would comfort Abram. I would give him a hug. I would say to him, “hush Abram; don’t fret about tomorrow. It may be that tomorrow’s child does not exist. But what you have done today has value. The altar that you have built is not just for remembering tomorrow. It is about giving thanks today. You worship today. You praise today. You live today. You journey today, stand before your Maker today. And in this, your altar has its very own beauty.

That is how I would comfort Abram. But his darkness is very deep, and his offering, in this day, does not seem sufficient. He tries to make an offering of praise - he really does. He brings a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove and a young pigeon. He sets them out as seems obedient and appropriate. It should be a worthy offering. But such is his place in the wilderness, that all his offering seems to do is attract scavengers. Birds of prey swoop in, and the teller of the story describes their target not as “the holy offering”, but as “the carcasses”. In the wilderness, Abram’s offering is described as “dead meat”.

The figure of faith . . . The figure of faith longs to bless others with what he has made - but there are no receptive others to be found. The figure of faith longs to worship properly in this moment, but it’s turned into talons, tearing and wings. Wilderness stories. Johann who? The felling of a tree? The forgetting of the tune. Vultures circle. Do you sometimes feel that it’s all moving towards an end?

The quiet Lenten conviction, the consistent theme of the season through which we, a worshipping community now journey, is that wilderness, for the people of Israel, and for Christian pilgrims, is often the context for a new beginning. (Light in darkness, life in the tomb, resurrection in the dying. Who can understand it?) “[But] when the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between the pieces [of Abram’s rotting offering]. On that day, the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying ‘To your descendants I give this land’.”

The failed offering is accepted. The dead offering becomes bright shining flame. The promise of a future is renewed. In the wilderness, something

is made new again. “Do not be afraid Abram, I am your shield; your reward will be very great.” [Genesis 15:1] “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? [Psalm 27:1]

The tradition tells us that Abram and Sarai *did* have a child to whom they left what together they had built. Isaac was just one child - hardly the constellation of stars of the original promise of God. But it's also true that Isaac's line threaded itself through the generations to produce someone called Jesus from Nazareth. It's further true, that a man who feared he would leave no legacy is remembered this morning by us, and by many millions of other people of faith. Indeed, he is remembered by us as we, in Christ, consider ourselves to be the on-going living of that same story. We're not just remembering - we are living an actual life - the rest of Abram's life, the life that appeared in Christ, and that in Easter finds its eternity. Not where rust and moth destroy - not where thieves steal away - but in the house made not with hands - solid joys and lasting treasures . . .

Not only is it a legacy; it's a legacy that forever lives.

-ooOoo-

I kept an eye on a tree. It grew. If it lives as long as most rimu do, it will still be there six hundred years from now. Something that I touched, that I helped, may well be there long after I have gone. Legacy. I suppose it's possible that the staff numbers at the school might expand. And it's possible that greater numbers of teachers might require greater numbers of parking spaces. It's possible that my tree may hear the sound of a chainsaw and wonder what this awful tearing is at its trunk. Johann who? The tune fades, forgotten. The human fear over leaving nothing to no one - losing the legacy. Yet as the figure of faith sleeps in his wilderness, God becomes the shield, the promise maker, the keeper of the word. Something is made new - the story goes on.

We keep a moment of quiet.

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