

Sermon Archive 239

Sunday 7 April, 2019

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Joshua 5: 9-12

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



In 1984, I was given a place on the National Assessment course for training for ministry in the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand. It was time for the national church to do what the local church already had done: take a closer look at this person and work out whether God was calling. Deciding that arriving at the course late would be a bad start, I'd organised all my things, my papers and ideas, put them on the desk in my bedroom. I'd studied the road map (so that I could get to Takapuna - where the course was being held - without getting lost). Right on schedule I went out to the car, thankfully to realise immediately that I'd left my papers on my desk. I whipped back inside, ran into my bedroom, grabbed the papers, turned for the door - and suddenly stopped.

I was suddenly struck by the fact that if today went well, I would be leaving this bedroom. When my mother fell pregnant with me, my father had turned what used to be the semi-internal carport into this room. When my parents brought me home from the maternity hospital they had laid me in a bassinet in that corner. This had always been my room. It had been my safe place. It was to this room that Father Christmas brought my gifts. It was in this room I'd ceased to believe. It was in this room I first popped a pimple and did all the other things - first infatuation, first break up. This room had been the frame for my life. There was something about stopping suddenly at the door - realising that if God was calling, if today went the way I had long hoped it would, I'd be leaving home. None of this had dawned on me as I went through the door only two minutes before. Somehow this had turned into an arresting moment. The day was revealed to be a day of possible permanent change. Loss of home. Beginning of journey. Going through the door into a different experience. That was the day, I think, that I realised that the journey had begun.

The journey's not over yet - but it's now been going for 35 years. Obeying the church's advice to get some work experience, there was the time of bus driving: early starts, the mystery of the mood of the travelling public. Leaving for Dunedin - training; deconstructing and reconstructing my faith. Good, caring, capable

teachers, readying me for parish number one. Ordination, learning to be available. Parish number two - Takapuna - the same church where I had attended the assessment course. Complex pastoral work, more good people, deep community connections on a beautiful sandy beach. Then off to Sydney for an adventure - feeling lost, getting lost, giving up and moving on. China, rest, being found again. Dunedin, and now I'm here, ministering with you - reading a bible text about a people who've been on a long journey (not thirty-five years, but forty years). The text has them arriving at a point of reflection, realising that today is a special day for remembering, for giving thanks, for letting go of what used to sustain them, and for tasting something new.

So here are four thoughts about their special day.

Thought Number One.

In the eight verses immediately before today's text, much attention is given to the fact that in the olden days, the people used to circumcise their male children. It was an odd way, but they believed God-directed way of marking in flesh, of saying with their very bodies, that they belonged to God. From their origins in Abraham, right through to the time of their suffering in Egypt, they had en-fleshed their commitment to being God's covenant people. Not like other people. God's people. Not the same. Different.

The author of the book of Joshua makes the point that somehow, somewhere, sometime in the wilderness years, that ritual marking had just ceased to happen. All the old circumcised people now had died along the way. The new generation arriving in the promised land this day arrive without their marks of commitment. They arrive without the peculiar difference commanded by God.

In Gilgal, they put this right. The eight omitted verses (omitted perhaps in deference to Western sensibilities and good public taste) make reference to the making of special-purpose flint knives, to bulk procedures, and to a period of eye-watering recovery for the men of Israel. Enough about flesh! But on this day, by that sign, they are called to remember that they have heard the call of God, have been challenged to consider themselves as people of special relationship and responsibility, and have been called into a life of being wounded by God. (Wounding - Abraham called to sacrifice Isaac. Jesus nailed to a cross. Deaths of the martyrs. We've already preached, haven't we, that none of it makes good taste, or acceptable sense - but that violence occurs within the mystery. So, a congregation considers the wilderness experience. We say our Lenten Litanies - asking to be led along the Lenten path. We dare to include a Holy Week in which

we're told to take up the cross. Pain, wounding, difference - it's a special day as the old commitment is made new again.

Thought Number Two.

On this day, for the first time in 39 years, they keep the Passover meal. They re-tell and re-enact the story of how their journey began. They go back to the beginning. So suddenly I find myself poised at the door of my bedroom - taking my first few steps by driving to a church at which I later would minister. I remember the naivety of my faith, the somewhat embarrassingly innocent way I understood church and world. The impatience I had just to get on with it. I wonder what **you** would return to, if you were to re-enact the start of your journey. Who were you? What were you like? How, what and whom did you believe? What were your desires? What used to frighten you? How did your faith begin? Maybe this is just the indulgence of memory, a form of spiritual nostalgia. Or maybe remembering the beginnings is important - in order to see the growth, to assess the travelling, to acknowledge the loss of the things or people you miss. On their special day of new arriving, the people remember the beginning. And God is in the sharing of the "remembering" meal.

So perhaps the congregation, you and I, also could hold a special meal - at a table big enough for all of us. Perhaps you and I should remember how the meal began - not with us, but with the host who first broke the bread - "this is my body - do this in remembrance of me". If **that** were to be part of **this** special day, would God be in it?

Thought Number Three.

The story-teller tells us that on that day, they ate the produce of the land - produce of the land that they had entered. And from that day, they no longer found, or ate, or needed the mysterious manna that had fed them throughout the wilderness time. They hadn't enjoyed the manna over the years. They'd often complained about it. They never even came up with a decent name with which to honour it. Called "manna" on the first day, it was called manna on the last day. Manna means "what is it?" They looked at it, didn't know what it was, but they ate it and it sustained them. On this day, it disappears from their life. It is no longer the way that God feeds them. They let it go.

I think of some of the ways that I received my daily bread over the last 35 years. There has been music. There have been special friendships. There have

been communities to which I have belonged. By these things, God has nourished me. In their time, they have fed me for this journey. They don't last forever, and such is the journey, that God provides new forms of nourishment. In a way, that makes me sad. But beautiful is that I am brought to a place now that sustains me. Certainly, we also now have responsibility for the new crop that feeds us. We need to do much more now than simply see it, ask what it is, and eat. Now we need to tend, to plant, to sow, to reap - if we are to be nourished. It's harder - but manna was never going to last. It was never designed to be forever. God calls us to be cultivators of the land of milk and honey - and we have grown.

Thought Number Four.

The Lord said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt." As God promised to free them, so today they have been freed. Now there is no sense of disgrace - no longer the disgrace of being one-time slaves. The hope was worth it. The nay-sayers were wrong. The journey has been into goodness. Arriving, arriving, now they stand tall.

What is that to us? This Lent we have given ourselves to listening to wilderness stories. We have acknowledged the power of the wilderness to form us. We have mourned some of the losses, some of the pains, some of the defeats inflicted on human beings by wilderness experience. Yet today, we hear the story of people taking their leave of the wilderness. The wilderness is not God's destination for humanity. God's destination is the place of milk and honey. It will come.

Soon we will enter Holy Week. We will watch the ultimate wilderness experience for the One called Jesus. At full force we will feel the death in the wilderness. But that is not God's goal. There is a light on the horizon - something called Easter. There is new daily bread. There is resurrection. There is nourishment for the people. There is life.

On a special day, we look back to the beginning. We offer thanks. We call God the great provider. And look forward to what is to come. Light on the horizon.

We keep a moment of quiet.

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