

Sermon Archive 251

Sunday 30 June, 2019

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: Galatians 5: 1, 13-25
Luke 9: 51-62

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



This is one of those sermons where it's a bit like putting four things onto the table - taking a wee look at each part, then seeing how they all sit in relation to one another. Four parts in conversation, gently gesturing towards some kind of insight that may or may not emerge. And so: four little ideas, and then some thinking . . .

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Here's the first thing: **rejection**. Of course, rejection isn't easy to talk about. It's one of those painful things. You offer your love to the special other one. Or more ordinarily, you offer your friendship to the non-romantic maybe-friend-in-waiting. And in doing that, you're making yourself vulnerable. To the lover, you put it out there - "I love you". To the friend, you put it out there - "hi, let's be friends". No, you don't put it in quite that naff way. But with equal measures of clumsiness and hope, you're extending your heart a little bit, holding out the hand. So when the hand is slapped, or the heart is declined, it hurts. Rejection. What to do with rejection . . .

One thing we can do is cry. Because it hurts, we just cry. Another thing I did once, was write a little list for myself. I called my list "I'm OK. And on my list I wrote things like "I can cook; I can play the piano; I'm well travelled; I'm actually quite interesting." I wrote a list to reassure myself that even if someone had rejected me, I was OK. I guess you could call the writing of that list self-affirmation, justification, a vain attempt at treating the wounds. Yes, we can do that. The other thing we can do is get really angry. That happens quite a lot.

Jesus and his disciples went to visit a village. They got rejected. One verse later we read that James and John asked "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" What talented men! *I* don't have the power to command fire to come down on people. But that's not really

it, is it? I **do** have the power to respond to hurt by being angry - and being angry in ways that damage the people who have hurt me. I want them to hurt. Because that's what we do in our hurt.

We are not given the detail of what Jesus said to James and John; but we are told that Jesus rebuked them. Hurting others, because we have been hurt, seems not to be the way of Christ. He calls us to something else. And that's the end of our first look at the first thing on our table.

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The second thing. Well, it's not so much a **thing**, as a person. It's poor old Paul - the loftily designated "Apostle Paul" - mired in his human complexity. My first reading of Paul's letters had me thinking he was boring - and at times he is. My second reading of his letters had me thinking he was arrogant and bigoted - and at times he is. My third reading (and subsequent readings) have me perceiving a man riven with doubts and anxiety. He hates his body ("who will rescue me from this body of death?" he asks"). He has some kind of thorn in his flesh that he never finds the courage to name - maybe he knows what it is, or maybe he doesn't. He has arguments with pretty much everyone who gets close to him, and has trouble keeping friends. He trades in Barnabas and gets himself a Silas. He trades in Silas, and gets himself a Timothy. Everywhere he goes he falls into argument. Jesus may be the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. Paul's just a shambles - - - but a shambles who knows he's called to resemble, somehow, the Prince of Peace - to be even slightly Christlike. If he just let go of the anger . . .

So, in his letter to the Galatians, we find him saying "love your neighbour as you love yourself" [Galatians 5:14], only then to deliver a long list of the sorts of people he despises: fornicators, the licentious, idolaters, sorcerers, the jealous, the angry (irony of ironies), the drunkards, the carousers, those in love with the flesh - the same flesh within which he himself senses the presence of a great thorn the name of which he dare not speak.

Trying to live this thing called "the Christian Faith", Paul swings between the insight that the neighbour is to be loved, and his intractable inclination to condemn his neighbour. Faith is trying to create a likeness of Christ in him, but really, against all the hurt and hate, it's just a struggle. Around who we are, what we aspire to be, and how we stand among our equally flawed neighbours, it's a struggle.

That's the second thing on the table.

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The third thing on the table is the curious case of Israel Folau. We are assured constantly that he is a person of sincere Christian faith - as was Paul. Certainly, quite a lot of the words Israel uses are echoes of Paul. I'm not a close follower of the Folau sermons, so it may be that condemnation of his neighbours is not as constant a theme in his preaching as it seems. He may be a victim of selective reporting. Whatever! What we seem to have is a form of faith that is angry. It seems to be troubled by the difference of the neighbour. It seems to be wanting to say "God is love", but not quite being able to enshrine it, to incarnate it, in human love. I wonder why. Does hurt hide behind the anger? Is it like disciples, saying "is it time for the calling down of fire", simply because they've been rejected? Is it our crying finding the form of hurting others back - as we ourselves have been hurt? I don't know. As we walk the line between what Paul might call flesh and spirit, the world is witness to the neighbour not being loved. That's the third thing on the table.

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The fourth thing. It's been a while since Jesus rebuked his disciples for being angry and judgmental. We're told that following the rebuke they walked on to another place. I like to think the walking may have been done partially in an uncomfortable silence - the awkward silence after a disagreement. Jesus then pipes up: "you know, foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but we have nowhere to lay our heads". Following their rejection at a village, a place they may have wanted to find a welcome, he warns them that "home" is not something they should expect to find. He then has conversations with people who want to follow him, but keep wanting to go back to connect with, or resolve, or be reassured by their past - things the way it used to be. And in each of short conversations, Jesus' consistent point is that "going back" is not "the way forward". Let the dead bury the dead - but you, come and follow me. Let the dead complain about the idolaters and the fornicators. Let the only narrative be the worst of the struggling, anxious Paul as he's hurt and angry. But **you**, come with me - we're going to another village - all hands now to the plough!

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Well, they're our four things on the table. Rejected people calling for fire to come down on other people. Paul trying to grow from hurt and anger into something fuller of grace. A young Christian getting huge profile and lots of money for condemning his neighbours. And Jesus saying "come away from what you do with your hurt and rejection, and follow me into a new engagement.

Wondering what might emerge from the four things on the table, I find myself forming a prayer.

It is a prayer for all human beings who are dealing with the pain of rejection. Rejection hurts, and can do bad things to us. It can turn us into angry, destructive people. So, I would pray comfort for those who are hurting.

It is a prayer for human beings who have captured something of the promise and hope of Christ, but who are still chained to judgement posts which keep them from loving their neighbours as themselves. Praying for the liberation of Paul to be the new creation.

It is a prayer that the world, in seeing the church, might not see anger incarnate, but love embodied.

It is a prayer that here and there, now and then, little groups of Spirit-inspired people may have the courage to leave behind what they know, how things used to be, how everyone managed to make sure that the dead were there to bury the dead, and walk into a new life. Don't fall back into some old form of slavery!

"Lord, would you like us to call upon fire to come down from heaven?"

He looks at them - says nothing for a while. Then he walks with them, leading them to a new place.

A moment of quiet.