

Sermon Archive 253

Sunday 21 July, 2019

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: Psalm 15

Luke 10: 38-42

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Could it be that I am living in God's tent, the dwelling place of God? Could it be that this hill upon which I live my life is somehow a sacred hill - a holy place - a place where God is to be found? There are no clouds or angels playing harps; there's no hem of the divine garment filling the temple. It's just me, muddling along among all of God's other people on earth.

It's among those other people, as we muddle along, that the psalmist, one of God's day-dreaming poets, thinks he might be able to work it out. If certain sorts of people are here, if certain sorts of inter-personal graces are unfolding, then maybe God is living here. "Who may abide in your tent, o God?" If those "who"s are here, then maybe God's tent is around us. Let's take a look.

-ooOoo-

Among those **believed** to be dwelling on the holy hill are those who do no evil to their friends - the good friend.

We are sitting across from each other at a table in an Indian restaurant. I haven't seen you since just after our school years, really. At school we had been best friends - well, I'm assuming I was your best friend - you were mine. In 1982, our first year at university, you chose economics and I chose philosophy and we each kind of just disappeared into that larger sea of people where old friends sometimes get lost. And I was distracted by what remains to me a mysterious romantic distraction somewhere else. Anyway, thirty seven years later we're having curry together. We talk about what we've done with that intervening time. We speak of our parents and siblings - nieces and nephews. We check out our politics and both agree that Trump is ghastly. We each laugh at the other, when presented with the menu, we rush for our reading glasses. The way we talk together is familiar and works well. As I talk to you I know again exactly why we were such good friends back then. We are different; we are the same; it all fits

together in a way called friendship. When the curry is gone, and the wait staff make it obvious they want to go home, we go our separate ways. As I take your leave, I say “you’re wonderful”. You say to me “you are too; you always were.”

When the psalmist goes looking for whether this - this muddling along of human beings - could possibly be a place where God is, he goes looking for the presence of those called “friends”. Perhaps, as we, all guards down, honestly affirm friendship, I am actually living in “where God is”.

-ooOoo-

Among those **believed** to dwelling on the holy hill are those who stand by their oath, even to their hurt.

In 1840, as the nation in which we live came into legislative being, an oath was made. Promises were made, and signatures were put to commitments. Following the oath, wars were waged and lands were taken. The crown gained much, and Maori loss was huge.

In 1975, following the path plotted by the late Norman Kirk, the government of Prime minister Bill Rowling established the Waitangi tribunal. It was to deal with current land claim issues. Not at all popular among pakeha voters of the time, Waitangi wasn’t necessarily the final nail in the coffin of a government about to lose to the Muldoon Panzer tank. And in fact, even the Muldoon government left the tribunal in place.

In 1985, David Lange’s government widened the tribunal’s brief to cover not just current claims, but historical ones. History was now seen as a suitcase full of things to be unpacked. This move was about as unpopular with non-Maori voters as the first brief had been. Maybe some had hoped that it might have died when Labour lost power in 1990. Alas for them, the National minister for Treaty Negotiation, one Doug Graham, had his heart completely captured by the idea of doing the right thing. I remember watching him weep in parliament as he spoke about the wrong done by the breaking of our nation’s oath.

Lest it be mistaken that this story is the story of pakeha suddenly and spontaneously doing the right thing, it must be remembered that a Maori voice had been calling for justice since the early 1960s. It took at least thirty years for that voice properly to be heard. The role of the voice of the prophets, the “shouting out” of the dispossessed, is hugely important in this story of the final honouring of the oath - which since (and often) has been broken again. But some of the people among whom I muddle along, stand by their oath - even to their hurt. When the psalmist finds this, he finds people whose presence suggests

we're living on the holy hill. Could it be that when promises are kept, even eventually, we're living within God's tent?

-ooOoo-

Among those **believed** to dwelling on the holy hill are those who do not lend money at interest.

I don't get you, Sonny Bill Williams. You hop between codes, and you enjoy boxing. I just don't get it. Nor did I really get when you made an issue over the BNZ logo on your rugby shirt. Surprising New Zealand Rugby, giving no warning or explanation at the time, you simply put a plaster over the logo. "Why did he do it" they asked. Yes, they could understand the Rugby ban on cigarettes and alcohol advertising. Gambling and weaponry we could understand - but you're taking a stand against a bank. Later you lodged a conscientious objection. Your Muslim faith prohibits the loaning of money for interest. It considers making money out of people's need for money - debt upon debt - loan upon loan - spiralling mire - to be contrary to being your "brother's keeper". Noble sentiment, we thought - but pie in the sky. The world needs banks, and how many of us would be willing to give loans without interest? Well maybe to family . . . Maybe to friends who had fallen on really hard times while we are comfortable . . . Maybe. Probably more sensible to leave it to the bank. You put a sticking plaster over the logo for a bank, leaving us thinking through how we support one another, how far our mouth is sometimes from our money . . . It's only rugby, and your sticking plaster's annoying. When the psalmist finds people who do not lend money at interest, he suspects he might be living in God's tent. He suspects he might be standing on God's holy hill. I'm not sure we're with the psalmist in this . . .

-ooOoo-

Also on the holy hill are others. There are those speaking the truth from their heart. There are those who don't do bribery. There are those who admire the right kind of thing. And we could spend time with them - wondering if God is present. But another story calls - of two women, both of whom kind of know that God dwells within their "muddling along".

One is Mary. She's getting nothing done. She's just sitting and listening to the Christ who has visited her house. There is something in what he says to her that brings her to a point of not having to speak, not having to do, not having to strive. She's happy just now for "now" to be a sacred minute. The addressed spirit; the engaged soul; the healed moment; the better part; the knowledge

that this, now, is the important thing. In times of poise, of peace, or worship, perhaps we know we live in the tent of God. (Hey, you; are you there just now?)

And Martha! So much to organise So many things to do! So concerned to do the right thing, that she's spinning around. Did I say we were muddling along? More than muddling; sometimes spinning. And maybe that's an image of humanity wanting to build its own holy hill, piling up the dirt in the middle of the plain - building its tower until its achievements touch the sky (do you remember that other tower we tried to build?)

For her, Martha, it changes, when her name is called by the Christ, and she's enabled to remember that God has actually come into **her** house. She doesn't need to build another tent, or find another tent, or climb any kind of hill - because the Christian blessing is that God has come to **her** tent - making the place where she lives her life, the place in which she muddles along, the place where God is. Distracted by many things, she realises that her own house has become the place where God is. Martha, Martha! God is with you. This is the house of God.

-ooOoo-

People of Knox - we muddle along together. We wonder whether we live in a world where God can be found. Some of us will receive the great blessing of having friends who take friendship not just seriously - but with real gratitude. Some of us will meet those who keep promises and stand by their oath. Some will be provoked by sticking-plaster prophets into being more loving and responsible custodians of the wealth we have. Some will hear words that speak to our souls and make us still. Some will hear God speaking our name until the spinning stops. In all of this, if we are fortunate enough to find these things in our muddling along, we will know that we live in God's world - we stand on God's hill. God's tent has been extended around us - a blanket in which we are wrapped.

-ooOoo-

Could it be that I am living in God's tent? Could it be that this hill upon which I live my life is somehow a holy place? There are no clouds or angels, no hem of the divine garment filling the temple. It's just us, muddling along among all of God's other people - and the Christ. Perhaps now we know where to look for signs of "God with us".

We keep a moment of quiet.

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