

Sermon Archive 255

Sunday 4 August, 2019

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Luke 12: 13-21

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Some years ago, a Chinese construction company acquired some land in Suva, Fiji, and decided to build a multi-storey apartment building. The piece of land wasn't huge, but that didn't matter. You can always build *up*, and every extra storey provides good investment space. Building consent was granted for many storeys, and no one can quite recall when it was first noticed, or by whom, that the maximum number had been exceeded. This building was taller than it was meant to have been. Also noticed was that it was closer than it should have been to the primary school next door. Also revealed was that the building materials that might have worked for a shorter building, were not up to the job of bearing the weight of a taller one. For a taller building, the materials needed to be stronger - and more expensive. The builders had made something bigger, taller, wider and cheaper than their consent allowed. Why would they do that? More interestingly, why did they think that nobody would notice or care?

Out from the relaxed and smiling community of Suva, objections came, and building stopped. Rather than change their business plan and lose a few storeys, rather than fix the mess of this large thing they'd created so far, they walked away. I guess equations were done and it was reckoned that "walking away" was the best business decision. Years on, now, the steel is rusting and the concrete is crumbling. From pretty much any vantage point around Suva, the view is polluted by this big crumbling thing. The ordinary people of Suva live in its shadow. As they come and go, as they speak and listen, as they breathe and step out of the sun, it looms over them. Palm trees, people, and the shadow of a big ugly barn. One hopes that no dislodged object ever falls from the upper levels onto a person below. It would be awful if one person's greed ever hurt, or killed, another person.

-ooOoo-

We are told that someone in the crowd called out to Jesus. "Hey Jesus; tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." (**Tell** my brother.) I wonder

why this man needs Jesus' help with his brother. Isn't it just annoying when your brother refuses to do what he's told? I'm sure he's been given clear instructions. Why would he not cooperate? Do you think it might be because he doesn't like being bossed around? That he's sick of his brother telling him what to do?

There is a kind of way of operating in the world, isn't there, that's all about pushing. We don't ask. We don't explain. We instruct; we require; we command; we tell. We tell our brother, our sister, what to do. And when it doesn't work, we either tell them more loudly, or we get other people to tell them as well. And I think it's wonderful that this person, in the crowd, who's failed to get his brother to cooperate, then tells Jesus what to do. He doesn't say "Jesus, would you help me". He doesn't say "Jesus, I need some advice". He says "Jesus, tell my brother what to do". Frustrated with telling his brother, now he's telling Jesus what to do. It's as if he's only got one form of verb - everything's in the imperative. His only way of engaging with the world, is to tell it what to do. I'm going to build my building - because that's what I want to do. Tell the people just to get used to it - then to live life beneath the shadow of my barn.

Perhaps Jesus ought to **tell** the person in the crowd what to do. No; Jesus **tells** him a story. It's a story about greed. It's about someone who thinks and speaks only of himself. It's about someone who makes plans solely about comfort for himself. And although he ends up with many things - so many things he's going to need a bigger, taller building - actually, he really has nothing.

One of my favourite video clips about the having of many possessions, is a short clip from an interview with Bob Marley; Bob Marley, late of Jamaica, a successful Reggae musician who came from a childhood of real poverty. Through hard work and creativity, he did well. With some of his first financial success he bought a big rambling house in a nice part of Kingston (two doors up from the governor's house, three doors down from the prime minister's house). The house needed to be big, because he wanted to fill it with friends and other musicians - to be a kind of commune of creativity. There was room there for music, football games in the front garden (can you play football by yourself?) This was a busy, noisy house. In response to one sideways look from a neighbour, and questions about what he was doing in that part of town, Bob was heard to say: "Sister, I'm bringing the ghetto uptown".

The video clip has an Australian journalist, sitting with Bob on the balcony of the big, rambling house, asking him about money.

- Bob, do you make a lot of money out of your music?
- Money? I mean how much is a lot of money to you?
- That's a good question. Have you made, say, millions of dollars?
- No.
- Are you a rich man?
- What do you mean "rich"? What do you mean?
- Do you have a lot of possessions? A lot of money in the bank?
- Possessions make you rich? I don't have that type of riches. My riches is life.

I've always enjoyed that conversation - because it's an exchange between two kinds of cultures, two sets of values. I'd always also been a bit entertained by the way that Bob's responses are mainly questions. He's saying a lot without saying it. (He's not telling his brother anything directly.) I quite like the way that the interviewer's assumptions are exposed - and how Bob seems a touch annoyed by the line of questioning - uncharacteristically annoyed.

This week I found the complete version of the news story from which the clip came. It's a twelve-minute story, produced by Gordon Dick for the Sixty Minutes programme. Gordon introduces his story, saying it's the story of Rastafarians.

There are 75,00 Rasta men in Jamaica (Gordon says). They're easily recognised. They don't cut their hair, and wear it in long pig-tails called dreadlocks. They all say they're religious and worship the dead emperor of Abyssinia, Haile Selassie, as Jah, God. And through their marijuana haze, they dream of going back to Africa . . .

Visiting Trench town - a poor part of Kingston where Bob grew up - Gordon says *"Someone once called this place a human garbage tip. Well, being here, and seeing how the people live, it's certainly easy to see why Trench town doesn't make it into the travel brochure . . . Jamaican poverty is violent poverty; and the dirt poor in Trench town often have nothing to do but fight - usually among themselves.*

Gordon describes Bob as a ganja-smoking Jamaican, ripped out of his head most of the day. His last description of Bob is “a stoned Jamaican who worships a dead Ethiopian dictator”.

Nowhere in the whole twelve minutes of the story, does Gordon appear to make an effort to understand his subject. His task seems to be to present Jamaica and the Marley movement as degenerate. There’s very much the feeling that Jamaica should be more law-abiding, whiter, more uptight, more like Australia. (“Jesus, tell my brother what to do. Tell him what to give me. Tell him to build a house that’s less like a party, and more like a storehouse - a big clean barn - more like an echo of me.”) Gordon’s exploration of Jamaica is really a defence of his own position - conservative Australian - because, as we know, it’s all about us, not them. It’s about telling our brothers and sisters what they should do, rather than seeing what they do, trying to understand what they do, or why they do it, or maybe even seeing the beauty in what they do.

Asked about possessions, Bob says “I don’t have that kind of riches”, and God says to the person in the crowd “you’re a fool”.

-ooOoo-

There you go. The sermon’s almost done. Just a few words to tidy up the ending - make it feel “finished”. I think I’d have been happy for it to have been preached to me - even un-finished. After all, the parable’s about greedy rich people - and I’m not rich.

Thank God, it’s not a parable about greed in the way we relate to one another - about a language that’s unable to break out of the imperative. Thank God it’s not about arrogance and control. The fight’s just about money - nothing to do with the way two brothers interact. From a parable that’s just about the money, I’ve got the middle-class exemption. Thank God . . . it’s not good when you get the feeling that Jesus is telling you what to do . . . you fool.

Hmmm. I think the sermon had probably better be over now . . .

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