

Sermon Archive 257

Sunday 18 August, 2019

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: Philippians 2: 1-11

 Luke `16: 19-31

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Your Majesty, a story circulates about you, and I'm not sure if it's fair. It certainly presents you in an unflattering light. It is said that you said "let them eat cake". You'd been told that your people were hungry because they had no bread. You replied "well let them eat cake then".

What cake would that be? Some sumptuous treat kept in some secret pantry out the back? The pantry next to the cupboard full of silver and gold? You're presented as a woman completely lacking in understanding of how hard the other half have it. No idea that "no bread" means "no food". It means "nothing to eat". It means "nothing". As you nonchalantly fail to understand them, fail to solve their problem, all listening know that you're living in just a completely different world. There's a chasm between you and us. Your Majesty, if you wouldn't be so kind as to follow me please.

-ooOoo-

Historians now question whether Marie Antoinette ever said "let them eat cake". Some claim the story was made up by Jean Jacques Rousseau, philosopher and friend of the revolution. But the story persists because it's a wonderful, pithy picture of someone who can't begin to comprehend what life is like for others. Even when confronted with the stark reality (and very bad news) of the suffering of the people, she just doesn't get it. It is a spectacular disconnection. There are radically different experiences of life - a chasm between this part of town and that.

And so it is, in the story-scape of Jesus, that a rich person lives in a house of fine linen and sumptuous food. He has plenty of cake. It is not story-told whether the rich man was aware of the beggar at his gate - whether he ever saw him. Nevertheless, whether visible or invisible (as this sometimes becomes invisible in the city), life for Lazarus is rough and real - as real as a skin infection, as real

as hunger. It's interesting that Lazarus has a name, whereas the rich person is nameless. The rich man is a type, a figure. Lazarus has an identity – he's a person. And the meaning of his name, Lazarus, is "God has helped", or "God will help". (Help! God will help. God has helped. Let him eat cake.)

Whether Lazarus is seen by the rich man or not, no help is forthcoming. There's a chasm half way down the driveway, and no one's crossing it. Can it be crossed? We'll never know, because in this story no one ever tries. These are separate lives.

Into these separate experiences of life comes the common experience of death; and suddenly the rich man **does** see Lazarus. There he is, held in what we prosaically used to call "the bosom of Abraham". And what the rich man sees, he wants. He has an idea. Lazarus can come over here and give some help. Surely the distance between us can be overcome. Now I see him; so now maybe I can understand him. Maybe in some way, I can touch him - even if it's only the very tip of his finger. We can meet. We can be in the same space, the same world full of angels, restitution, and justice and caring.

Father Abraham says to the rich man "no, it's just not possible". *"Between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us."*

Last week I said that I wasn't a great fan of the multi-storey universe, with God in the heaven and people down on earth. I said [quote / unquote] "next we'll be digging the earth in search of hell". And this week, bingo - torment in Hades. I don't want to tell this story in that way, though. I want, instead, to affirm simply that when lives are lived separately, and without mercy or understanding - the result is what seems like an unbridgeable chasm. And the chasms are wide. Even in moments of panic, or desire to have lived it differently, we can end up feeling restrained, isolated. How could we have ignored the poor person at the gate? How? Don't know, but we did, and that reality is kind of fixed in the intransigent past. It's not going anywhere. Can we find away across it? Father Abraham's not confident we can.

There's another story, from another religious tradition, of Siddhartha Gautama. He was an Indian prince, living in a palace. His father, the king, was determined that his son should never see anything upsetting, nothing that might ever take him away from the throne. He filled the palace with dancing and feasting. Everything was made beautiful, and kept beautiful - top quality cake, one might say. One day, though, the prince's curiosity took him beyond

the palace. Allowed to go, only on the condition that guards would clear the place of any signs of age, sickness, death or renunciation before he saw it, the prince stepped into the real world.

The story is told like this:

As the prince passed through the city in his royal carriage, people lined the road to admire him. The guards followed the king's orders as best they could. But even so, the prince spied in the crowd a man with gray hair, weak limbs, and bent back.

"Driver," said Siddhartha, "what is wrong with that man?"

"He is old, my lord."

"And what is 'old'?" asked the prince.

"'Old' is when you have lived many years."

"And will I too become 'old'?"

"Yes, my lord. To grow old is our common fate."

"If all must face old age," said the prince, "then how can we take joy in youth?"

Not long after, the prince spied a man yellow-faced and shaking, leaning on a companion for support. "Driver, what is wrong with that man?"

"He is sick, my lord."

"And what is 'sick'?"

And you get the idea. Next he sees death. Next he sees renunciation. Once he sees the reality of the world, the prince has no option but to leave his artificial world, and live in the real one. Crossing the chasm, he becomes the Buddha.

We have a similar story in our tradition. Ironically, the same One who tells a story of a chasm that cannot be crossed, is presented as the Son of God who travels to the far country - to live among a people previously considered to be beyond the company of God. Renouncing equality with God, letting go of divine privilege, he empties himself, serving others, living for others, dying among others. He goes down to the gate where humanity lives, and the chasm is crossed. Life is shared. Will God help? God has helped.

I wonder what difference that makes in the world - the existence of a people who believe in, who consider themselves in-grafted into the continuing presence of, the One who crosses chasms. In a real world, where we feel the power of the chasms, and know their reality, what difference does it make that Jesus is able to renounce his privilege and live with others?

Eloquently illustrated in the politics of the United States, but also manifest in the United Kingdom, and manifest on most political stages around the world, polarisation is the ascendant force. People are divided, progressively more so. There is a chasm between the rust belt and the liberal university. There is a chasm between white and Hispanic. There is a chasm between mainland China and the democracy protesters of Hong Kong. There is a chasm running right across the mud of Ithaca. There is a chasm between pro-life and pro-choice. There is a chasm between the Christian fundamentalist and the rainbow people. And as we tell the story of our planet (which we have no option but to share with others), it seems these chasms are victorious. (So low, you can't get under it, so wide you can't get over it.) The rich man and Lazarus will never really find a touching point. **WRONG!** Buddha breaks out of his palace. The Christ makes his journey to the far country. Chasm crossing does happen. Life **does** get shared. And, O the beautiful contradiction, when the risen One does appear in the garden, and by the gates, and at the table, and where the dogs lick the wounds, faith and new community find form.

What difference does it make in a world of chasms - that some people travel, that some people serve, that some people believe and refuse to become cynical? Well, who knows! Perhaps we should try it, and see. Let the cynics eat their cake! We're off now down to the gate.

The sharing of life. The reconciliation of experience. The seeing of Lazarus . . . We keep a moment of quiet.

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