

Sermon Archive 258

Sunday 25 August, 2019

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: Isaiah 58: 9b-14
 Luke 13: 10-17

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Derek was a little younger than me, and came from a large Catholic family. He was one of seven siblings. I think he loved all his siblings, and was pleased that they had been born. He was, however, aware that his parents had, at times, struggled with the financial implications of having had such a large number of children. He also wondered, in the larger, more ecological scheme of things, about the planet's capacity to sustain an escalating human population. At the time that I was talking to him about these things, the AIDS epidemic was taking off as well, with huge numbers of people across Africa, in particular, dying through the lack of a condom. Along with all this, at the time of his marriage to Tina, he was committed to completing a long-ish course at Otago Medical School. There were many good reasons (well, he considered them good) for him and Tina not to get pregnant. Although his church faith and tradition was anti-birth control, it didn't sit well with him. As he continued to participate in the life of the local Catholic community, praying, confessing, receiving mass, he was going to exercise a bit of liberty of conscience.

Some years later, I found myself in Sydney, at some ecumenical event. I was talking to a Catholic person about my old friend Derek. I described Derek as a "Catholic", then spoke of his decision to use birth control. My conversation partner told me, somewhat abruptly, that I should not be describing Derek as a "Catholic". If Derek was not being obedient to the church's teaching on birth control, he was no Catholic. Being Catholic is not only the praying, the confessing, the receiving of sacrament; it is submitting, with humility, to the teaching of the Church. It doesn't matter whether it's about birth control, papal infallibility, or trans substantiation; if Derek considered himself "first arbiter" of what to believe, and how to live, and what to do, then he wasn't

Catholic. Because it's all attached to the issue of authority, unity, Derek was a loose canon, not one of the faithful. It's a package deal. You can't just be putting things aside.

I remember thinking, that conversation went well! My liberal self could dismiss it - the comments of a narrow, arrogant man! Obviously, Derek was Catholic. But what does it mean to live faithfully within a tradition of wisdom that is greater than myself - to live in a respectful way that's integrated with what others long believed God has said?

It's always difficult, isn't it, when you stand within a tradition, and you love it, yet parts of it cause you trouble. This is very much the case for me, as I consider my denomination's position on gay and lesbian people in leadership. Through the authority of its courts, and the operation of its decision-making processes, my denomination has come to a belief I just can't "own". So what am I to do? Well, I can take the way of Derek, holding my own position and framing my actions around my private position. Or I can acquiesce before the authority of the church, and hope for some form of ministry to my broken conscience. Or I can look for a clue in Jesus . . . in how he moved into new places - places once constrained by old wisdom.

Jesus belonged to a faith tradition. As an infant, the Jewish Jesus was presented at the temple. He was circumcised on the eighth day. He was brought up in the Law of Moses. He was taught to keep the Sabbath.

But by adulthood, having been disturbed by the intrusion of the Living One, some parts of the package, though, are beginning not quite to fit. In fact, if you scratch the surface of his mood, we see that some of the parts are making him angry.

Interrupted from his very Jewish activity of teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath, Jesus is confronted by the suffering of a woman. She can't stand up straight. And this affliction has been affecting her for eighteen years. (I wonder how the human spirit's doing after eighteen years of struggle and discouragement. Not so well, I wouldn't think.)

He heals her. She's well. She's free. **Everyone** in the crowd can see that this is wonderful. Well, actually not **quite** everyone. One voice comes at Jesus - and it's a voice speaking from deep within the tradition. It says "by doing this, you've broken one of our laws. In doing this work (technically,

healing is 'work'), you have sinned. What you have done is bad."

Talk about scratching the surface! Jesus hits back immediately, calling the speaker a "hypocrite". If not angry, Jesus is certainly frustrated!

I don't know! Keeping the Sabbath is one of the key Jewish disciplines. It's set out in one of the big ten commandments. You can't just be putting these things to one side because it doesn't suit you, or you didn't think it through properly. It's all linked to authority, unity, the wisdom of the ages, uniformity of practice and belief. That's what the voice says. That, however, is also the voice to which Jesus responds with anger. It seems there were times when Jesus **would** let go of part of the package - stepping away from bits of his tradition.

I guess the important thing is to explore **how** he did that, and **why**. I think one of the best questions I've ever been asked as part of the awkward conversations about my disagreement with the Church over rainbows is "**why** do you believe what you do? **How** did God show you where you need to stand?" We have to wonder why.

In the case of Jesus and the Sabbath law, he says "which one of you, on the Sabbath, won't untie your ox, or your donkey, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham subjected to an obscene length of suffering, not be set free today?"

As soon as he says this, his accusers feel ashamed, and the other people praise God. It's quick - almost visceral. From each side of the argument, everyone knows that the truth has been spoken. He doesn't talk about Sabbath. He doesn't talk about work, and whether healing is work. He doesn't talk about Law or anything in the tradition. To that extent, he doesn't engage in anything formally theological. He talks about **mercy** - and everyone just knows he's right. There is something unarguable about mercy.

When do we put aside parts of our tradition? We do it when **unarguable mercy** makes it clear that we **must**. There is a central place within the tradition, within the calling, within the nature of the God it's all meant to be manifesting, for **mercy**. When they see mercy being done, when they hear mercy being defended, the people just know that it's right. They probably keep on observing the Sabbath, keeping it holy - but they

probably also now are more careful about what “holy” means. Can a Sabbath be holy, if there is no mercy in it?

It’s interesting how Isaiah describes keeping an “honourable” Sabbath. For Isaiah, we trample on the Sabbath, we desecrate it, when we pursue our own interests only. Honouring the Sabbath is done as we cease serving our own selves, and pursue the welfare of the other. (The other - the interests of the other - is this a bit like extending mercy?) Feed the hungry, satisfy the needs of the afflicted, cease pointing the finger . . . does this sound like moving towards mercy? If a good Sabbath is kept, “the Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water whose waters never fail.” And the woman will stand up straight, and the people will rejoice in the good that Christ is doing - if mercy frees us to let go of what would keep us bent over. When do we let go of what kills and constrains us? When do we let go of parts of our tradition and faith that get in the way? We do it as mercy makes it unarguably clear that we must.

Let’s do a little thought experiment. Let’s send Matthew and Derek to meet their Maker. Derek says “Lord, I disagreed with my church on birth control. I lived my life at variance with the teaching of the Church. I’m sorry it came to that, but I’m not sorry about practising birth control”. Matthew adds to the confession. “Lord, I disagreed with my church on sexuality and leadership. I expressed my identity at variance with the teaching of the Church. I’m sorry it came to that, but I’m not sorry about who I am”. What will the holy One say in response? Will it be a Sabbath response? Will it be holy? How will the men fare, compared to the oxen and the donkeys? What do we hold on to? And what do we let go of? How will the people witnessing it be enabled to rejoice in the wonderful things that Jesus is doing? Mercy! We let go, people stand straight, as Jesus appeals to basic mercy.

We stand bent, waiting for the word of Jesus.

And we keep a moment of quiet.

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