

Sermon Archive 262

Sunday 22 September, 2019

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: (Amos 8: 4-7)

Luke 16: 1-13

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Mr Lee, a child of light, loved God very much, and also loved his wife, Mrs Lee. They studied the Bible together and kept a faithful prayer life. One of the Bible characters the Lees admired greatly, for his faith, was Noah. Can you imagine building an ark so big - while all your neighbours scoffed in derision? The Lees had never quite worked out how two of every kind of animal could have found space in a man-made thing; but if the Bible said it was so, who were the Lees to doubt the Word of God? It was just a *miracle*. When asked to testify to the God of miracles in his own life, Mr Lee had no trouble choosing his story. As a teenager, Mr Lee had contracted mumps. It left him with a zero sperm count. *Zero*. Then, a few years later, as the result of an unfortunate bicycle accident, the situation was made even worse. Let's not speak of that! But, praise God! By the intervention of the God of light, Mrs Lee conceived and bore a son - who didn't look Korean, but was perfect in every other way. Mr Lee gave thanks to God, and Mrs Lee, looking a little uncomfortable, was amazed at her husband's unquestioning faith. Mr Lee - pure of heart, loving and trusting - a child of the light. What's that sound? Is it Noah's neighbours laughing?

Gustav Mahler left his hometown, to apply for a job in Vienna. The job was Music Director of the State Opera House. Keen to get the job, and clear in his own mind that the House would never appoint a Jew, Mahler got himself off to St Stephen's Cathedral, denounced his Jewish faith, and got himself baptised. Outside the cathedral, after the baptism, he told his friends "I have only changed my coat". It wasn't even as deep as "skin deep". He took on the Christian identity in a completely token way for entirely self-serving reasons of ambition. At the cynicism, the God of Moses wept. At the sacramental prostitution, the God of the One who was baptised in the River

Jordan said “hah”.

While working at the Vienna State Opera House, Mahler treated his orchestral players roughly. They learned to fear and hate him. When he moved on from there some years later, the “thank you and farewell” note he left on the noticeboard was found screwed up and thrown on the floor. When writing his symphonies in his little composition hut in the Austrian woods, the maid, ordered to bring him coffee mid-mornings, was also yelled at if she delivered the coffee too loudly. He knew exactly what he needed to do his composing, and would railroad, sacrifice anyone who got in his way. Driven. Ruthless. Shrewd in dealing with his own generation to get what he wanted, Mahler bequeathed us this:

Sound clip: Urlicht, Resurrection Symphony.

I, for one, am pleased that Mahler wrote that music - although I wonder if the maid ever had a chance to hear it.

It would be nice if people fell into easy categories, wouldn't it? And if their contributions to the world were in line with their character? We could have the God-fearing ones in one corner, blessing the world with wisdom and righteousness. And in the other corner we could have the nasty people preying on the world. The moral demarcations of it all could be clear and simple. Unfortunately though, quite often the God-fearing ones are naïve and stupid, and in their foolishness hurt the world. Gullible and simplistic, they pour ignorance into a reality they can never actually fathom. And unfortunately also, quite often the crooked, mean ones are the ones creating taonga for the world - creative geniuses, scientists and scholars. The moral nature of it all is all a bit porous and messy. In a world shared between the children of light and the children of this age, all sorts of debts, crossed agendas, and complicated transactions arise. And because the “good” ones are stupid, divorced from what actually is happening, and the “bad” ones are clever, using reality, sometimes it doesn't go so well.

In the parable of the unjust steward, we have some gospel things happening. The mighty are being brought down from their seat. Those in debt are being set free. Corruption is being un-masked - all enough to bring a song to the heart of a child of light! The trouble is that it's all being done by someone with bad history and motivation. The unjust steward is doing it

all to build his own security - now he's been exposed as a criminal. Also, he's arrogant and lazy - - - yet setting people free. He's a complicated figure to work out. And Jesus has the religious cheek to suggest to us that, maybe, we could learn a thing or two from him. "For the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light."

Religious cheek. We find Jesus' suggestion cheeky because, as I've said, we like to keep our categories of "good" and "bad" separate. We like to be naïve in our division of holy and unholy, of righteousness and sin, of (as Paul put it) body and spirit. The devil may have all the best songs, but we know we really ought not to sing them. We need to keep wicked things at a distance. But humanity isn't like that. It doesn't work that way. Mr Lee and Gustav Mahler are both present in every human person. We're conundrums. Consider Jesus - the perfect Lamb of God: he was repeatedly guilty of breaking the Sabbath. He got angry and smashed up the temple. He was not beyond calling a Canaanite girl a "dog". He was a convicted criminal. Where did the idea come from, or when was the idea allowed to run away laughing, that Jesus was simply, one-dimensionally only good? (Faith is for cartoon characters wearing halos. "Walking humbly with God" is done in straight lines on two [only two] dimensions, no light and shade.) No! Jesus was a human being - as are we who dare to rise to the challenge of being his body in the here and now. Human beings are Gustav Lee (both Mahler and Mr Lee in one). And in the precincts of this parable, Gustav is called to give up his dark thoughts that his dark side has nothing to do with serving God. Mr Lee is goaded to abandon his aspirations of saving the world through his naïve and gullible goodness. And, as each lets go, we are told to watch and learn.

-ooOoo-

Here's an editorial confession. As I wrote this sermon, I ground to a halt at this point. I felt I'd made the obvious point that humanity is a complicated mix of moral and immoral. I felt I'd made the point that Jesus made - that we need to leave our naiveté behind, and learn from the world around us. Well and good! I made a cup of tea, and spent a few hours going around in circles. Some thoughts came to mind.

I, like the unjust steward, am trying to make a future for myself: it's called

saving for retirement. The returns on the investments I'm making are smaller than they could be, because I've instructed my superannuation people not to invest in oil, weapons or gambling. The world, from which I might learn a trick or two, has no problem with those sorts of investments. Can I learn from it? Should I learn from it?

The Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand has decided to adopt a shorter remediation schedule for its earthquake-prone buildings. The secular world gives longer for buildings to be put right. The shorter frame (the higher standard of the Church) is causing headaches all around the country, with churches scrambling to find money they don't have to fix buildings that are probably OK. Jesus tells us that we can learn something from the world's skill at cutting corners. Can I learn from that? Part of me feels I **want** to.

And yes. If having power in the world of the children of this age, is a sign of having operated shrewdly, then maybe I should be looking for a teacher in Donald Trump. Can I learn from him? My spirit cringes.

This is why I think I stalled at this point of writing the sermon. In the spirit of catching fleas from the dogs (yes, like Jesus, I just called other human beings "dogs"), I just want to be careful about **from whom** I learn - and **what** I learn - and that the better angels are driving the process. And I'm finding it interesting that the lectionary people, who choose our Sunday readings, have paired the parable with a reading from Amos - who condemns people who rip off the poor. Is it as simple as, as we learn from the children of this age, not to forget the poor, to remember the need of the neighbour?

I don't know. It's **not** a simple matter, and this remains an unfinished sermon. For the moment, Jesus tells us to leave our naiveté, to learn from the world, to risk losing if not of our soul, then certainly of our respectability. Not an easy start along the razor's edge . . . I hate it when things are a challenge . . .

A moment of quiet.

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