

Sermon Archive 267

Sunday 27 October, 2019

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Psalm 84: 1-6

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



In December of 1963, a baby boy was taken to old St Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Howick. The plain wooden church, a study of late Nineteenth Century Presbyterian modesty, was no great monument. During a service quite in keeping with that lack of style, the boy was baptised. The minister, Arthur Maddock, told the baby that he was a child of God, and belonged to the people of God. He was assured that there would always be a place for him there. The water was sprinkled, the crying was done, the promises were made. This is your home, little one. This is how things should be.

Well life got busy for the parents of the baby. Doing their best first with one baby, then with two babies, then with three, the days were fairly full. They did a good job, did those parents! And there was always love in the house. But juggling needed to be done, and priorities pressed in. Church disappeared. By the time the baby had grown into his teenage years, he'd become an almost completely secular creature. There was no ill will towards the church, towards the religion - but that corporate thing called "the congregation" was a total stranger to him. Faith was not part of his identity. Not sure how things ought to be, but that was just how things were.

The boy, now become a teenager, fell into conversation with the "new" minister - well new is relative; Sam had been there for ten years by then - how time flies when you're busy not being in church. The conversations were good - respectful, thought-provocative. Through them, there was a deepening of "if not understanding", then at least of appreciation. Conversation led to involvement in activities. The first church service ever attended by the teenager began as everyone stood for the Bible, and sang, with one voice, hymn number one: "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God almighty". The teenager was struck with a sense of joyful, obedient unity - hard to explain; he hadn't experienced it before. Over time, friendships within the congregation formed. Trust developed, and one day the teenager was given a key to the building, so he

could come and go as he pleased. On one key-accessed visit to the building, the teenager was walking through the foyer just outside the main worship space, and stopped in his tracks. He'd been struck by a thought - or maybe a feeling. It was "I would rather be here than anywhere else. This is where I belong. I belong in this place."

What had been said to the baby? This is your home, little one. This is how things should be.

Maybe twenty five years later, a man, himself now a minister, delivered a speech to a congregation in another building. This is what he said:

People of St Stephen's.

I thank you for calling me to be your minister. I believe that during my ministry here, this church has done some good things. Together we have made important differences for many of God's people . . .

In the last year my responsibilities in ministry have changed. I have been drawn into heavier management responsibilities for which I have no natural inclination. I find more of my time is being spent doing things to which I do not feel called. The Church Council knows that this is the case.

I am finding it increasingly difficult to deal with the unhappiness that exists between many of you. Further, some issues have arisen today which have put me in an impossible position as the manager of your parish.

The Uniting Church appoints its ministers in five year terms. My five year term is due to expire at the beginning of February next year. I need to inform you that I will tell the presbytery appointment review committee due to visit me next month that I do not wish for my appointment at St Stephen's to be extended beyond February 2010 . . .

That's what the minister said. Four months later he'd sold his ministry books, burned his paper files, and was gone. He'd formed the view that ministry was not something he wished to do again. The Christian community was a group from which he wished to put some distance. He walked away, getting as far as churchless China! China being churchless was wonderful - I'm not a creature of the church. Not sure how things ought to be, but this was just how things were. Church was not his home.

Five years later, in another building - more like a hall than a church (what had

happened to the church?) - some people gathered for worship. They said to the person they were welcoming "This is our church, and we believe you belong here". He said to them "I agree. This is how it ought to be."

The old minister had said to the baby "you are a child of God, and belong to the people of God". The new human being was assured that there would always be a place for him in that house. The water was sprinkled, the crying was done, the promises were made. This is your home. This is how things should be. Was this a long way around to reclaiming that sense of proper placement - belonging?

Psalm 84 is one of the Pilgrim psalms - one of the ones that Jewish pilgrims would have sung on their semi-regular trips to the temple. On one level you could say they're singing about a building - a particular place on a hill in Jerusalem - a temple that isn't any longer there. But it's not really about the building; it's about singing a pilgrim's belief that it's good to be journeying, with the others who sing the song, within this thing called "faith" - being on that journey to God, with all God's other people. We can be carried away to other places. We can be distracted by many identities. We can seek our secular expression on our own individual paths - but when we see the house, approach the house, take our place within the house, it's like our pilgrimage has led to truth - to who we are, where we belong, how things should be. How lovely it is to have reached this. I would rather be here than anywhere - and look, so would the sparrow - she's built a little nest in the eaves. There's a naturalness, a nest-like peace, in arriving home. So says the pilgrim's psalm - and so say all those who sing it along the way.

-ooOoo-

On Wednesday we gathered here for the funeral of Barbara Ansell. Barbara first came to Knox in 1968. She had little contact at that time, and ever since, with her blood relatives. That appears to have been a decision she made. Using the raw material of other human beings whose journeys had brought them here also, Barbara made for herself a new family. Deep, long-lasting friendships were formed. Her talents and satisfaction-through-service were moulded and grown. She loved being here, and when she couldn't be here, she longed to be here. ("Here" was here, but it wasn't a building.) "My soul has a longing for the courts of the Lord" - not for the

physical materials of which it's made - but for its feeling like it's the seat of where we find the God who integrates, who binds, who mends, who welcomes – who makes a pilgrim family. It is on this journey, in this household, in our being part of this “God is building”, that we belong - that's how it felt on Wednesday.

After Barbara's funeral, people got talking - and talking to people we don't see much of these days (old friends, long-lost ones, those whose journeys went elsewhere). There was re-connecting - a re-realising of how important we had been to one another - and maybe still are, even though a lot of time has passed. There was a lot of reminiscing about church camps, and Friday craft evenings, and the presence of people-now-faded who then were full of life and fun. It felt like a **family** gathering - nothing to do, mind you, with genes and bloodlines. This was something that had been built by a Creator, a Redeemer, a Giver of life - like a beautiful temple on a hill, to which we all know we need to go - even the sparrow knows.

The old minister says to the baby “you are a child of God, and belong to the people of God”. The new human is assured that there will always be a place for him, for her, in that house. The water is sprinkled, the crying is done, the promises are made. The pilgrim people march up the hill, towards the house, singing their song. Even before the temple is reached, among those who walk with you, you are home. This is how things ought to be.

How dear to me is your dwelling, O Lord of hosts! My soul has a desire and longing for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh rejoice in the living God.

We keep a moment of quiet.