

Sermon Archive 270

Sunday 17 November, 2019

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: Acts 6: 1-7

John 4: 5-24

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



I am in my brother's garden in Suva - the capital of Fiji. Andrew has a big, solid gate on his driveway, to keep "something or someone" out. The people living one door down from him have razor wire along the top of their walls. I look at the razor wire. I imagine that there is some reason why it's there, but I don't fully understand what the reason is. I don't understand this place.

In my brother's well fenced back garden, at night there are frogs. No respecters of razor wire, they just jump as they will, and jump away when I go to see them. I only see their bottoms. They're quick to jump away. At night, though, I still can hear them croaking. They jump the boundaries and croak.

In the Fiji heat, with the frogs now hidden, I look at the lawn under my bare feet. It's not the same grass as we have here, in Aotearoa New Zealand. The grass there is like little salad plants. Crinkles, rather than strands. Bunches, rather than strands. Grass is different. Everything here is different in every way. Beautiful, and different.

My mind went back to the time that I was a house master at a church school in Dunedin. We had a wee boy who came from Fiji. His name was Tristan Marshall. Tristan found himself in this place, far beyond the sea. When he took off his shoes, and went out onto our fields, he trod grass that was different. We spoke around him in an accent that was different. The bird song was different. Pretty much everything would have been different. And what did we do, back then, to help him through the differences, to honour his place, his past, his identity, his home? I won't

answer my own questions; because to do so would break my heart. In those days, we did nothing - not even talk about it. How strange it must have been to him - and we didn't even talk about it.

We have two readings today. The first features Jesus trying to work his way through a cultural misunderstanding to human unity.

The second features the early Christian community, in the love of Jesus, trying to work out how to support one another.

Let's have a sermon.

-ooOoo-

It's hot, and every human being needs water. So the human beings go to the well to get what they need. On this particular occasion, at the place where human beings gather for what they need, a Jewish man meets a Samaritan woman. According to the mores of their time, they ought not really to be meeting. There's an ancient prejudice there - stories of things gone wrong. It's stupid, of course; but sometime the times present us with things that are stupid.

Within these stupid times of Jesus at the well, the Jews and the Samaritans have decided not to share water vessels. They've also decided not really to engage in conversation. Each culture considers itself better than to share food or drink with a lesser. Each culture considers itself superior to speak. Jesus certainly goes into this cross-cultural experience as a Jew - with his story being told by someone sympathetic to the Jew; and on top of that we kind of pile 2000 years of Christian authority on top of his entering that conversation, as he goes to the well. In actual fact, the well to which he goes is in Samaritan territory. Our Jesus, our insider, is actually an outsider in this place. Never let us fall into the trap of thinking that our culture guarantees us advantage. (Who is the insider? Who is the outsider? Will Jesus leave these categories undisturbed?)

All right, in this place, where cultural advantage is slightly ambiguous, Jesus ends up talking to a Samaritan woman. Fairly soon, she, rather than he, names the situation. "You ask me for water, but your people and our

people don't share water." It's kind of written: never the twain shall meet. Jesus and the woman speak of their culture's past - sort of because they need to.

If we were to talk about our past, we'd have to mention Palagi taking influenza to Samoa. We'd have to talk about dawn raids in the 1970s, mainly in Auckland. We'd have to talk about nuclear testing in the Pacific, and how non-Pacific carbon consumption is flooding Tuvalu, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands. Jesus and the woman start talking about what divides them, what in the past they believed defined each against the other. It's quite an honest conversation - not the kind that would have been very fun. But here, between Jesus and the woman, it's part (maybe an important part) of what's happening. Naming the reality; acknowledging the broken situation; being real.

But then Jesus and the woman then enter a new phase of talking. They find a way of speaking not only about divisions, but about common origins and common hopes. Jacob, our common ancestor, gave us this well that feeds us both - that feeds us both. And a day is coming, and even now has come, when it won't be about this mountain, or that mountain, but about one community, in spirit and truth, being fed by the love of God. Living water, sourced from the God who satisfies our thirst, shared by all the people.

You would like to think, wouldn't you, that the people of Jesus were good, then, at unity and sharing in love - that people of Jesus were skilled at feeding one another. But in the other reading today, we find them fighting. Some are Hellenists (Greeks) and some are Hebrews (Jews), and it seems a resentment has developed between the factions. It's over a perception that one of the groups is being neglected in the daily distribution of the food. Within the love of God, and the belief in Jesus of the well, marginalisation has happened. And when the matter is raised, the leaders say "this is not our problem; we're focussing on preaching the word of God". How sad is that! Divisions; argument; hunger; denial of responsibility. What hope does this community have of finding the living water of which Jesus spoke?

Well, faafetai, give thanks; it seems that the Spirit moves. For somehow,

within this community, they develop a new way, a new structure, such that the neglected, the aggrieved, do once again receive the food that is their due. Called by their community, affirmed by their community: Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. These names say something wonderful. Some are Jewish names, some are Latinized; some are Greek and some come from way out East. You might say they come from many islands. So, justice is done, people are fed, community is blessed, and dare we say, God is found at work among them.

Carmen and Suli, please tell those who work with you at Tagata Atumotu, that we, at Knox, believe that God is at work among you. You work among Pacifika people, making sure that they are fed - that they receive the daily food that keeps them strong and surrounded by love. We rejoice in your work - and dare to say that it is the work of God. We feel like we have met you at the well, and received something full of life. We pray that we will be friends for a very long time, discovering together a way of spirit and truth.

So, talofa lava. Bula vinaka. Fakaalofa lahi atu. Fakatalofa atu. Kia orana. Mālō e lelei. Kia Ora.

We keep a moment of quiet.

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