

## Sermon Archive 271

Sunday 24 November, 2019

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Luke 23: 33-43

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



One stage, three people, and hope met with a promise.

-ooOoo-

The stage upon which this scene is played out is not a good one. The society has quite rightly determined that human community, if it's to work properly, requires a state of order. There's nothing wrong with that - it all makes sense. We all know that life struggles when chaos descends, and that a sense of structure, peace and security, enables people to flourish. So, of course, societies find ways of keeping things orderly. Maybe we teach the children civics in school - how to be good citizens. Maybe we bluetack ten commandments posters to the Sunday School wall. Maybe we develop honours systems and New Zealander of the year events to say "this is what we admire; this is what we want". Maybe . . .

But this particular society, providing the stage for this scene, has come at it differently. It has decided to create order by executing punishment. Yes, most societies do this. Most of us have courts and prisons; and most of us believe that this is just a sad necessity. Not every society, though, accepts capital punishment, the killing of its citizens by the state. Nor, indeed, does every society allow the killing of its citizens by cruel and unusual methods. Crucifixion is slow. It's designed to maximise pain. It's done in public, to create fear in the public. What we have here, in this scene called the place of the skull - the Cranium, is a torture chamber, on a hill, in a city. This is how this society is creating order - unnatural, full of fear, violent - but in the name of order.

As of 1 July last year, in the United States, there were 2,738 prisoners on death row - waiting to be killed, in the name of order. Russia executes about 730 per year. And in Hong Kong, right now, today, the Police force beats

people and shoots people, to keep order. This is what we want; this is how we work. Spare the rod, and spoil the child. For the sake of order, we act in a disorderly way. And so we create the place of the skull. Does it seem self-defeating to you - a little mixed-messaged? That's the scene.

In the shadow of that hill, being readied to play his part in that scene, comes the first of the three people. Somehow he's turned into a criminal. Nature or nurture? Genes or environment? That's a complicated one! Sometimes it's a shock when someone ends up in court. And sometimes no one, really, is all that surprised. We know nothing of this character's story - but we do know that he's been formed by a society that punishes and is cruel. Maybe some of that has rubbed off on him in an unhelpful way. Clearly the person who's been formed is cruel as well. We're told he's giving his last few hours to deriding one particular other human being. What are your last words? Words of mockery. He's not the only one, of course; the soldiers also are mocking. And the crowd is mocking. Mocking is the culture - the common response. This is what we want; this is how we work. No surprise that he should act this way. It's part of the disorder we impose for the sake of order - and within it, we become who, for the moment, we are. That's the first of the three.

Also having ended up a criminal, behold the second human being. We don't know what he's done, but we know that he knows he's done it. He has no desire to protest his innocence. In fact he says out loud to the angry person next to him "we're getting what we deserve". I find that sad - because in a humane society no one deserves to be punished like that - but as we've said "this is what we want; this is how we work". So the human being, formed by that, believes it deserves cruel and unusual punishment. Self-aware about its deeds - yet hateful about itself. Formed by the violence, hanging on a cross.

This human being, though, refrains from the all-pervasive pastime of mockery. This one uses his last few moments to comfort another human being, to say to the other human being "I know that you are good" - and to ask that he may be received into another, better kingdom. Formed by one kingdom, asking to belong to another. This may be how **we've** worked; but it's no longer what **he** wants. He has seen a different way. That's the second person.

The third person *is* the different way. He lives, and now dies, the different way. Those who condemn and crucify him mean to be wittily cruel and ironic when they call him “king”, but a king he is - of the different way.

There has been something in how he has lived, what he has done, whom he has been willing to befriend, or love, or forgive, who he believes himself to be, that has enabled one criminal at least, to desire admission to that other way.

One says to the other “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom”. The other replies “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise”. A moment of faith is met by a word of promise. The better way receives you.

That was one scene, and three people. Thanks be to God.

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What now, though, for the people of the king?

The people of the king are called to embody him - so that now, in these days, there might be something to capture the eye of the second criminal - the life of the king continued in flesh and blood, the “other way” being lived. And in the scene that we have explored, perhaps that means two things. The first thing the king does is to say “Father forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing”. Forgiveness. The second thing the king does, is to hear the request of the second thief, and respond with assurance and welcome. There is room for you in my kingdom.

So when people find the power to forgive, to say “yes”, and to make room for the other, that is the re-living of the life of the king. On the ruins of their bombed out cathedral in Coventry, the people engraved on their old East wall “Father forgive”. For the pilots who dropped the bombs, for the officers who ordered them, for all who made war the chosen way - not anger or resentment! A community decided to say “Father, forgive”. The life of the king?

Farid Ahmed, at a memorial service here in Hagley Park, said that he forgave the man who killed his wife and many of his friends. People were

amazed that he really seemed to mean it. The life of the king?

Pope John Paul II, not one of my favourite popes, went to visit Rebibbia Prison in Rome, where he spent time talking with Mehmet Ali Agca, the man who had shot him four times in St Peter's Square. John Paul later asked his congregation to pray for Agca whom, said the Pope, "I have forgiven". He later lobbied the Italian President to pardon his would-be assassin. Agca was pardoned and set free. Is this the life of king?

And not just forgiveness, but also "yes and welcome". In 1944, New Zealand's Prime minister, Peter Fraser, authorised the reception, in Pahiatua, of 732 Polish children. Most of them were orphans, all of them were refugees. At the recent 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their arrival, many spoke of how, after the breaking up of their families, and their interment in Siberian work camps, and being flicked from Poland to Russia to Iran (as if nobody wanted them), how wonderful it was to hear Kiwi words of welcome. "Yes and welcome - come into the kingdom". Is this the life of the king?

And on a table at the back of a church in Christchurch, the people have placed a little rainbow flag. Yes, to you, and welcome; the kingdom is for you. Is this the life of the king?

If the second criminal sees these things, he sees, she sees, a different **way**. No longer is the punitive, punishing option the only option. No longer are we compelled to frighten and mock. Not if the king is present and working . . . - the life of the king. What now? Embodying the life of the king.

Your kingdom come; your will be done on earth - as it is in heaven. Lived by the people, the life of the king.

We keep a moment of quiet.