

Sermon Archive 272

Sunday 1 December, 2019

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Matthew 24: 36-44

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



According to Matthew, as he remembers and describes the situation, just before the flood, people were going about their business – getting on with life. They were eating and drinking; some were getting married. One imagines that others were getting divorced, and some were catching a bus. Some would have been burying their dead, and others were maybe building larger barns. The life of the city in all its variety! But then suddenly, one big catastrophe came upon them all – and they all together were swept away. Who expected that? No one. But in the event, there was something of a levelling – everyone, altogether, changed, moved, affected by an awful act of God. Are you rich? Flooded. Are you poor? Flooded. Are you eating? Flooded. Are you fasting? Flooded. The flood comes, and all is levelled. All are affected. One world – we are all the same.

-ooOoo-

I imagine that I've spent most of my preaching life affirming that we all are the same. As you were made from the dust of the earth, so I was made from the dust of the earth. As you were given life, so I was given life. As you look at the stars, so I look at the stars. There's something levelling, egalitarian, about our created-ness – being the sons and daughters of Eve – living things.

And in terms of the flood, that which cancels us out, makes us dying things, there's also something kind of levelling about that too. Just as you have a pain in your knee, so I have a pain in my elbow. As you are tired, so I am capable of being weary. As you are suffering cancer, so I am dealing with heart disease. As you one day will die, so I also one day will die. The flood takes us all away. That it does, each of us in the same water, gives us a curious unity; it makes us one.

And we, here in this particular community, value the idea of other kinds of

equality, unity. Our mission statement says that some of us are straight, and some of us are gay. Some are old and some of us are young. Some of us are rich, and some are poor. Some identify with this culture, and some with that. Some are of this faith, and some of us are of other faiths. We say diversity is good and to be cherished – but that, ultimately, in terms of God, we are all one. It's been important for us to say that – so that's what, in all our integrity, and with good conscience, we've said. Members of the living, dying, swimming, sinking, flooded human race, we all are one. And as Matthew says, they all were eating, drinking, marrying and being married, and knew nothing, until the flood took them away. One in the living. One in the dying. One.

HOWEVER . . .

Now there comes to the world some strange kind of division. Two are working in a field. Suddenly one is taken, and one is left. Two women are grinding meal, side by side; from their identical tasks, one is taken and one is left. The world is divided – into the taken and the left - divided by the God who is said to be coming in Jesus – and for whom we are urged to be ready.

In the interests of being ready, let's talk about divisions – and about being awake to, or ready for, Christ.

One big divide is that between the generous spirit, and the mean spirit. The generous spirit gives. The mean spirit only takes. It is indeed about **material** giving and taking, **material** sharing and withholding. Is my food, for instance, only for me? Is this my bread exclusively, and my wine alone? Or is the bread to be broken and shared among all? The wine to be served to many? If you can't afford to put food on your table this week, then is there a place for you here, at mine? Indeed it's not just about physical sharing – there's something interpersonal too. Is there, as it happens, a generous conversation - in which I share, and accommodate? As opposed to a mean conversation, in which I shout and drive and insist? Is there a giving of self, a revealing in our discourse; as opposed to a veiling of who I am, for the taking of the other? Am I generous with the truth of you and me? Or am I a withholder of what might make us one? Yes, we all know about generosity and meanness – a clear but sometimes ignored divide. But what does it mean to be awake to the coming of Christ? One is taken; one is left.

Stay awake!

Another great divide, around which we can position ourselves, is that between possibility and cynicism. Sometimes I can want things to be different, and can give myself to making things different. Possibility! Other times I imagine that everything is fixed, and there's no point in trying. Sometimes I can believe that people can change. Other times I feel we're all doomed to execute the entirely expected. Sometimes I hope the prisoner will do well once released. Other times I declare her doomed to recidivist inevitability. Sometimes I say "Come, Lord Jesus". Other times I say "you probably won't come". I can build my world around openness, or put it in a box. How central is hope to who we are? How important is it to live with a thirst towards the refreshed and renewed? What does it mean to be awake to the coming of Christ? One is taken; one is left. Stay awake!

Another divide around which we seem to live: the divide between peace and discord. I can go into politics, for example, with a sense of public service, or I can go into it for my own personal gain – money and ego. I can govern in a way that frightens and intimidates the people, or in a way gives people confidence and autonomy. I can gather up your taxes, and spend them on jet fighters, tanks and nuclear bombs – for the making of war. Or I can spend them on measles vaccinations in Samoa – saving the people. I can tell my soldiers to keep the peace, or to bomb a civilian target. And if I'm not in politics, and am just an ordinary person among people – I can move among the people as a servant of peace, or a provoker of war. Someone who reconciles, or someone who divides. One is taken; one is left. Where is Christ in our world? And how are we to stay awake!

One last divide: one who sees the business of faith as earning wages and demanding just deserts; and one who sees it as a matter of leaning on God's mercy. I can spend my life in an anxious campaign to earn love, to tote up good deeds by which I barge through the pearly gates to get my just desserts. Driven, profit and loss, ultimately fraught. Or I can trust God to love me, to forgive me, to welcome me in. Self-constructed pseudo-saints on one hand; humble recipients of pardon on the other.

Those demanding the salary; those receiving a present. Those seeing blessings as a logical response; those seeing it as a delight. Wage or mercy? Right or blessing? One is taken; one is left. Where is Christ in our basic attitude to the good that we have received? Stay awake!

-ooOoo-

That's the sermon almost done.

Advent is a strange season. We spend it meditating on the coming of Christ – and what that all means. While we meditate, some of us will eat, and some will drink. The occasional one will see the clouds looming and build an ark. The basic experience of being on the planet, and walking the human gait will be common to all. But here is a story of one being taken, and one being left. One moving up, and one staying down. Jesus doesn't tell us why or how. Yes, the preacher floats some ideas – some thoughts about how we are sifted, divided – by our own self-selection. And maybe there was some worth in the preacher's efforts to think that through. The preacher wants to know how we should live – and how some move up, and some move down.

Jesus simply says "one goes; one remains". Why, how, when, is not known by the angels of heaven – not even by Jesus himself, he says! "Do you know, Jesus?" "Not at all", he says. He knows that even to him, it will be a surprise. He tells us simply to stay awake.

So we go into the rest of our day, wishing to manifest living wakefulness – looking to see in our choices, in our attitudes, in our presence to others, in how we give and receive, the way of the coming Christ.

A living wakefulness, as we look for Christ . . . and keep a moment of quiet.