

## Sermon Archive 280

Sunday 9 February, 2020

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons:     Isaiah 58: 1-12  
                  1 Corinthians 2: 1-6

Preacher:    Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



As, like a great steel wheel beginning to turn, the industrial revolution swung into motion in England and Wales, great waves of country folk came into the cities. Can you smell the burning coal? For some, the move into the city didn't go well. Noise, crime, overcrowding. Soot, cholera. Inevitably, some people suffered poverty. The cities did, of course, have strategies in place already to deal with this. Parliament had passed a raft of laws, collectively known as the "Poor Laws". The poor laws required local parishes, parish by parish, to collect taxes from the people to pay for the relief of the poor. Part of that relief was the provision of accommodation for the homeless - the poor houses. Poor houses operated in a barely adequate way for quite some time - until, with the arrival in the cities of those increased numbers, the system became overwhelmed. There were just too many poor people.

Murmurs among the tax-payers became more than murmurs. People began to resent having to pay the tax. Word in the electorate was that some of these poor people, cluttering up the poor houses, were not simply poor - they were lazy. They didn't **need** to be in the poor houses; they were there simply because they couldn't be bothered working. So it was, that in 1834, parliament passed the Poor Law Amendment Act. The main principle of the Act was that, as a deterrent to the lazy poor, life in the poor house had to be worse than life on the street. The Act deliberately required conditions in the poor houses to be made worse. Each parish, parish by parish, reformed (or should we say de-formed) their poor houses to make things worse.

"Parish", in those times, of course was a sort of local government unit. But the local government units were based around the boundaries of churches that had been there forever. The people who did the practical work of the

parish, were church appointed. They did what they did in the community, in the name of God, and by the imprimatur of the church.

It was in this situation, that one particular satirical serialist wrote a story initially called "The Parish Boy's Progress". Later the story would become known as "Oliver Twist" by Charles Dickens. Looming large in the early chapters (and to return later in the novel when particular cruel authority needed asserting) was the figure of Mr Bumble - the parish Beadle - committed to a charity role, but having no charity. Appointed for hospitality, but providing deliberately fashioned inhospitable condition. Theoretically motivated by the church's concern for the poor, but practically guided by legislation of deterrence. Giving food to the children, but becoming abusive and violent when the children ask for more. **Saying** grace, but **having** none.

Within the Parish Boy's Progress, some progress is made. The government policy, implemented by the parish, succeeds in creating sufficient misery, such that the boy is relieved when presented with an alternative to the poor house. He is given into the care of another parish figure: Mr Sowerberry, employed by the parish as its undertaker. Mr Sowerberry's wife, Mrs Sowerberry, enjoys talking about the indolent poor, the underclass's lack of moral fibre, the uselessness of this particular boy. She would rather that the boy was somewhere else. Mr Sowerberry, on the other hand, appreciates the boy, because the boy's sorrowful expression makes him a perfect professional mourner. The misery of the poor is good for his business. Let's take financial advantage of the fact that some people are sad. In the parish, it's helpful that the boy is sad. It suits us that Oliver is sad.

The Sowerberrys, of course, are fictional. Mr Bumble is fictional. Surely it could never actually be that religion would produce not just cruelty, but also hypocrisy. Attending to the provision of food, but deliberately keeping the people hungry. Working for the parish, but making a living out of the sadness of the child. The Parish structure appearing to care, but implementing legislation that makes things worse. Surely the author exaggerates!

In the first of today's two Bible readings, the prophet Isaiah observes a religious community at work. The community is doing the obvious religious things. It's holding its days of fasting. What is fasting, but an experience of solidarity with the hungry! What is fasting, but making a sacrifice to God - expressing righteousness! The parish is doing well, but beginning to feel annoyed that God hasn't yet said "congratulations". I'm not sure how they think God might express congratulations. Maybe by taking away the poor people. Maybe by reducing their taxes. Maybe by removing that nagging sense of guilt. I'm not sure; but they say to their God "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why do we humble ourselves, but you do not notice? Whatever irritation the vestige of guilt creates, the people are blaming their God. Mr Bumble doesn't exist. The Sowerberrys are fiction - as fictional as the God who's not responding to the religious fast.

Well, from the great non-existence, Isaiah's God begins to speak. Look, you serve your own interests on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Is not this the fast that *I* choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not hide yourself from your own kin?

Something critical is missing from this fast. It's kind of facing the wrong direction. Don't fast for me! Share your bounty with those around you!

The second Bible reading has Paul reflecting on the time he spent with the people of Corinth. He's thinking about how they managed to articulate the wisdom of God - not the wisdom of the world, he says - the kind of wisdom, perhaps, that might logically conclude that if the work house becomes worse, the boy will choose to leave. See the logic is fine - and in Oliver's case it work. The boy leaves, and the parish is free from its responsibility. The plausible words of worldly wisdom proved lofty and right. But the wisdom that Paul has in mind wasn't lofty. It was about how that community had testified to a man who came in love, and suffered with the people, and died and bequeathed life to those who

followed him. It's a different logic from the logic that makes things worse. It's the mystery of worse things being raised to life. Don't fast in the wrong direction. Share the life you have with those who are around you. We have received, said Paul, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us - wisdom is understanding the gifts that have been bestowed. It is not good when the child is sad. It is not good when the people are hungry. It is good when the gifts that have been given are understood - understood until they are given again - and the fast is broken.

Loose the bonds of injustice, undo the thongs of the yoke, let the oppressed go free. Share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless into your house; when you see the naked, cover them, and don't hide yourself from your own kin. In this is the wisdom of God. There almost ends a sermon about an act of parliament, religious hypocrisy, fasting in the wrong direction, and seeking the wisdom of God. There it almost ends. Almost.

This year, both here at home, and also in the United States, people will be elected to governmental office. As we head to the elections, I have no doubt, there will be conversations about poverty and the place within it of laziness. There will likely be murmurings about how much things cost, and whether it's fair for us to pay. Bumble will mumble, and the Sowerberrys may speak. Hopefully there will be discussions that aren't purely about personality or stereotype, but actually about policy and logic. And maybe there will even be discussion about whether the logic we're hearing is a logic still in conversation with righteousness. And through it all, various contenders will tell us how **they** think we should make decisions that are wise.

The right kind of fast. The deep understanding of what has been bestowed. The presence within the story of the crucified One who gives life. The Parish Boy's Progress. The wisdom of God . . .

We keep a moment of quiet.