

Sermon Archive 285

Sunday 5 April, 2020

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: Matthew 21: 1-11
John 15: 1-7

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



We've had two readings today - both of them presenting models of **community**. On one hand, you have the community of the great city of Jerusalem, doing what comes naturally to it: one minute loving, but in the next minute hating; one minute singing, but the next minute shouting; one minute receiving, but the next minute rejecting. The **same** people of Jerusalem who welcome Jesus today, within just a few days will be calling for him to be crucified. It's all pretty volatile in Jerusalem. That's one model.

And then you have the other model: the community of the vine - some ridiculous, utopian vision of Jesus, of a people who just quietly grow, and live, and abide, and belong - and through all of that, somehow put oxygen into the world.

In a time of isolation, when community, how we live together, is being deconstructed, and not yet reconstructed, this might be a productive distinction to explore.

And I apologize if I present Jesus as a bit of a country boy in this sermon - a young man going to the city - but maybe that's who he was.

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Jesus wanted to change the world. He had a vision to share, which he sincerely believed had come to him from God. And the community that he'd managed to create around himself, over three years of journeying around, suggested there was a lot of "God" to it. Forgiveness, healing, reconciliation, love. It really was full of "God". But if, after a while of doing it around and about in the back-blocks, and the places where the wee people lived, eventually, you'd need to take it to Jerusalem - the centre of religion and culture.

I could go into a reverie just now of the significance of Jerusalem - how it was a symbol of his nation's faith, with its temple and its priests in abundance. I could talk about how it'd been used in the people's poetry as some kind of symbol for where God lived (as if God lives in one place!). But actually, for now, I'm seeing Jerusalem as the one big city in Jesus' immediate world - the place where most of the people were. And if you've a vision to change the world, after "cutting your milk teeth" on the villages, and the rural communities, where are you going to go? You're going to go to the big city - where, in good big fist-fulls, the world-changing people can be found.

What does he find, when he gets to the city?

He finds government. Actually, the real government's in hideous Rome; but here in Jerusalem there are Roman people. They represent sewers and taxes, and the death penalty. Let's try to avoid that one. Don't want to go too close to the death penalty. Rumour has it that sometimes it's meted out to people who don't deserve it - the innocent. Can you believe it? I'm sure that only happens in the minds of the paranoid, and those who don't trust those appointed to rule us. An innocent man would never be killed. But, I guess, the possibility of that exists in this city of a mass of people whom Jesus hopes will help him change the world.

Also in the city, he finds the news industry. I guess some of them are trying to tell the truth. But some of them, also, most probably are just trying to sell copy. I think I told you a few weeks ago that Shane Jones had been watching pornography again. Did I mention that it wasn't true? Bugger the truth. We need to sell copy. And while Jerusalem will contain many people who want to speak the truth, there will be those there, also, who don't care, but who speak anyway. What is the gospel? Full of grace and truth? How about the money? 30 pieces of silver. Selling the story . . . Does Jesus know what he's walking into? I don't know. Do you?

Beyond the media, the news people, the story-tellers and column-pushers, he's here for the people, the big herds of those who might just change the world. One of them's a minister of religion. Another might be an out-of-work truck driver. Another might be a call-centre coordinator, keeping his team on track, selling, advising, calming. Another, poor bugger, might be working at a supermarket during a pandemic. But they're forming this big web of hearts and minds, and opinions and focus-group input-ers, that can either welcome or reject. Does he want to step into such a thing? Well he must reckon it's worth

the risk, because he seems to be going that way - riding into the great complicated unwashed.

What else does he find in the city? He finds a wee network of good will. There's someone in there who's decided to loan him a donkey - a way of transporting himself into this place of bells and whistles. Not sure how a donkey's going to go. The flash people might giggle. (God, is that all he's got! a donkey!). Others might try to defend him by seeking things in the tradition about donkeys, and peace, and humility, and how very much the great Almighty loves a common donkey! People in the network do come to his defense. Good luck to them! But these people, like you and me, trying to get on with our lives, and make a crust, are whom Jesus seeks, as he comes to try to change the world. And we're **here** in the city - to which Jesus comes. We've got a donkey to loan him - because we just might reckon he's the real deal. Is he? I don't know. Do you? Time, this week, will tell.

This is the city into which Jesus comes. He **has** to come here, to find us - so we, together, can change the world. Does that situation into which he comes all sound a bit volatile? Does it sound a wee bit like it might all just become unstable, and change, and stop singing "hosanna", and start shouting "crucify"?

I don't know - although I do really know. And so do you. This model of human community, into which Jesus comes, sings then kills. It's all over the place. Volatile. Passive-aggressive. Caressing, then cutting. Kissing, then striking. How does one change the world from here? And that's the first model of community of which we hear today.

There is another.

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Jesus speaks of a community that is a plant. It's a plant. What do plants do? They're anchored in the earth, and they quietly just grow. The branches don't battle one another - they just live there, and draw from their common source of life. When conditions are grim, maybe they wither a bit - but they wither together, because they are one together. And when they grow, they grow together, because they are one. And some of them keep close to the earth, so they can be fed by the earth. And some of them stretch out to the sun, to be warmed by the sun and fed by the sun. And sometimes, some of the branches die, and are removed, because that's life, and that's death, but the life goes

on. And sometime there are flowers, maybe - if it's that kind of plant - with poetry, and science, and music and marriage, and children and love, and church (lovely flowers!).

But at the heart of this vision of community is an organic togetherness and stability. It grows in God's garden, and it is living, and it is at peace, and it is one.

So there you go. The second vision of human community: "I'm the vine", says Jesus, "and you - in your bubble at home - you are the branches".

Here we go! You and I, who are the branches in the vine of Jesus, also have to live in volatile Jerusalem. We're branches of the vine who also are citizens of the volatile city. How's this going to go for us?

When a virus comes to a volatile model of community, things go potty, and God in our midst gets handed over to be crucified. I don't know how to reflect on that further, for the moment. But volatile community goes hither and yon, and does the weirdest, most destructive things - even though it probably doesn't want to, and later will weep at the third cock crow. And part of us lives in that, and is formed by that, and will suffer for that.

Another part of us, though, hears the call to that other kind of being together - being more like a tree, a plant, a one-ness, a beautiful and peaceful piece of creation, within which we are nurtured not to kill God, but to love God, and thus also to love those who bear the image of God - our neighbours.

As some kind of acted expression of this, I'm going to take my palm branch (a dying sign of Jerusalem, wanting to do its best, but generally inclined to do its worst), and place it within the vine.

Make of that what you will! There will be no miracle for the palm. The palm (and all it stands for in this story) will wither and die - but the vine will live. (That other vision of life from God, and people at peace, fed by the life of Christ, will live).

It will live!

And I think that might just be the end of this sermon.