

Sermon Archive 295

Sunday 24 May, 2020

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Luke 24: 44-53

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Let's make a few confessions about this most recent phase of the story of Jesus and his people. Since Easter it's been different - but also the same. Jesus has gone out of his way to say "No, it's still me" - there's a continuity with how things were. He shows them his hands and his side, so they can see the wounds they knew had been inflicted on the old Jesus they knew so well. He reminds them of conversations they'd had before. He's the same one they've always known.

But in these recent days he's been appearing behind locked doors - which he never did before. He's been appearing as bread is broken - like he's present in the actions of others in Emmaus - at the same time as he's been appearing to others down the road in the city. He's not seen by most of the world - but he seems to be seen by those who've loved him and want to see him. Seeing Jesus and believing in him are all tangled up, and one wonders just how it's working. Although he wears his sameness, through his wounds, he's not the same creature in time and space. In his conversations now, he says things like "these are my words that I spoke to you when I was still with you" - are you not still with us? If not, what's this conversation?

So when we read of his people walking with him on this fortieth day of new life, they're not walking with a regular guy. They're journeying in the mystery of a risen presence (who is both there and not there). I know that doesn't make sense, or maybe it does - it's kind of strange.

So let's let that acknowledgement be made, and let's let it allow us, with our broken bread burning in our hearts, and with our belief that wherever two or three gather, he is present, to explore the story not so much with our dull realism, as much as with our philosophical imagination.

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In forty days, if you were a god, you could wash the world with water, then give the earth a new beginning after a flood - and hang a rainbow in the sky to announce a promise. It'd take you forty days. In forty days, if you were a god, you could come out of desert temptations, sure of who you are and ready for what you must do. It'd take you forty days. In forty days, though, if you were the firstborn of the new creation, and you had some people you loved very much, whom you knew still struggled with the new way you were, and couldn't quite put the pieces together, but were about to become your hands and feet (and discernment in the world), what would you do? How would you spend your forty days?

Those whom Jesus loves seem to have been led to spend their forty days immersed in the scriptures. I know! . . . I too have spoken to people who grew up in households when the Lord's Day was celebrated by turning off the radio, putting the comics away, visiting the family graveyard, and reading nothing but scripture. At first blush, a forty day Bible study doesn't sound terribly fun. But if we can strip away all the Presbyterian dourness from the scene, let's come from a different angle. The disciples know Jesus well. They've spent three years with him, listening, being invited to speak, and ask questions. They've heard his stories, and let his parables play with their imagination. They've helped him feed the multitudes, and consumed the wine that used to be water. They've known the trauma of losing him; and for them denial and justice and evil will never be mere concepts anymore - but realities with edges as hard as nails. None of what happened made sense - how can cruelty make sense? And now: this strange experience of him being present, but not. It's all been real, but kind of unreal. It's floating somewhere here, between the earth upon which we stand, and the heaven stretched above us. Would that we could understand!

For these forty days, he takes that wee bit of the story (the three years) - which they know, but cannot understand - and sets it within the scriptures - that longer story of human people. The story of people living in the garden, recipients of all that was good. The story of their weeping as they left the garden, carrying the tragic realisation that sometimes we stuff things up and can't get free. The story of law-givers and poets and prophets calling us back to what we lost. The story of One who would rise up from among them, and live with grace and something that redeems, and shows the strength of truth

and love. The story of someone called Job, who sat among the things that were broken and nonsensical, but said "I know that my Redeemer lives, and one day will stand upon the earth".

The disciples are being encouraged to take what they've experienced over the last three years, and look at it again in the frame of what people have always sought and hoped for. What do we hope for? Peace? Purpose? Understanding? Justice? Love? Company on the journey? These are indeed the sorts of things we seek, when our hearts are allowed to rest in the right place. They're the ancient, enduring goals of the human heart. And the disciples are given time to read their own lives, and their own unanswered questions about Jesus, in the light of the long, long search. What would you do with your forty days? Well, if you were a god, you'd spend them helping your disciples to see their three years within the frame of eternity.

Well, maybe too much Bible study can give you itchy feet. So, on this fortieth day, let's take a break and go for a walk. In the presence of the One who is there but isn't there, who's helped them begin to reframe their lives, they get out to stretch their legs - take in a breath of fresh air.

They find themselves walking towards Bethany. They've walked this way before - it's sort of like their home. Bethany's the place they used to go when things got too difficult, when Jesus seemed to need some space. He went there after that incident in Solomon's Portico - where they people tried to arrest him, and took up stones to stone him. He just went to Bethany. Another time, when he was there, someone finally understood him, and anointed him, and washed his feet - got him ready. Bethany was where his dear friends Mary and Martha and Lazarus lived. Bethany was the only place where Jesus had openly wept. His naked place. His loving place. His place for being real - the closest thing he had to a home.

So, as they journey with this One who's there and not there, they're full of thoughts of home. it's lovely that their open air wanderings should take them to a place of home. Perhaps Jesus thinks it's lovely too, because just as they near the place, he chooses to bless them. He lifts up his hands, and blesses them. And while he's still doing that, in the middle of blessing them, he's gone.

Even though we're here in the middle of an engagement of the imagination, the spiritual imagination, I can't help myself! The grammarian within me notices a detail. Luke could have said "once he had blessed them, he was carried up to heaven" - like Jesus had finished his blessing. But Luke says "as he was blessing them, he was taken away" - like Jesus hadn't had time to complete his blessing. O, if I were Jesus, and I'd been interrupted mid-blessing, I'd consider that "unfinished business". I'm not sure I'd resent being taken away. But I'd certainly make it first on my list of things to complete - which maybe is a good way to consider Jesus - the One half way through blessing his people, intent on completing what he started - for, and possibly through, those who now are his hands and feet. Getting us to finish that last uncompleted task of blessing . . .

Indeed, we're told that the disciples move on from this strange fortieth day, equipped to be a blessing. They now have a conviction that they need to share what they've found, take it to all people and places. There's no sorrow over parting from him - since maybe they know that he's finally home, and there's a sense of a full circle being completed, and things ending up in the right place - with something beautiful, in the meantime, having been woven. We're told they go back to the city, eager to see what Spirited thing will happen next - some movement at Pentecost - a wind, a flame, a new enabling. They go back to take up a life of hitherto impossible joy. Indeed, they go back, with a feeling that this has all been very good, and isn't yet over. Seasons come. Seasons go. Clouds gather; they disperse. Ascension is affirmed, and people let go. But then, as two or three gather in the name, is he there again?

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This sermon was never going to make sense - no more sense than someone floating between the earth we know and the heaven we believe - no more than wind and fire that next week might come. Ah well. The sermon, not the mystery, now is done. And waiting upon the Spirit, we keep a moment of quiet.

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