

Sermon Archive 297

Sunday 7 June, 2020

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: 2 Corinthians 13: 11-13
Matthew 28: 16-20

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Just before the sermon proper, I have a short public service announcement to make. Although the Apostle Paul instructs the Corinthians to greet one another with a kiss, we can't allow any kissing here this morning. Neither kissing, nor the blowing of kisses, nor holy kissing - whatever "holy kissing" might be. Although we're enjoying a bit more freedom from Covid restrictions, we're nowhere near the point of kissing one another. Please do not kiss your neighbour today in church.

-ooOoo-

I'd like to tell you a beautiful story. It's a story about a God who loved the world **so** much. As the God looked at the world, the word that came to mind was "good", even "**very** good". No, the world wasn't perfect, everyone knew that, but the God was inclined to think that it was, because, you see, that's how love sees the beloved - the eye focusing on the good, while the heart forgives the imperfections, and kind of turns the critical eye away.

In this story, longing to be as close as possible to the good world, the God, who had certain freedoms, decided to become part of it - to join the creatures which crept and flew and swam, and walked and danced. As that baby cried from a manger in Bethlehem (breath and tears), it was a divine affirmation of humanity. I want to be human; I want to be like you; it's a huge honour for our being, that the God should choose to be like us - to express love (not by kissing!) through being a human person.

The risk of expressing love through being a human person, of course, is that that love may not be requited. There's always that risk, when you put love out there. Love can't be imposed; it can only be offered in hope. Bernie Taupin writes a lyric for Elton John to sing: what've I got to do to make you love me? And as soon as your hear it, you know it doesn't work like that. Love can't make anyone love

back. Love just offers itself, and then it respects the freedom of the other to respond.

And, indeed, respecting the love of the other was what the God-person got on with doing. It's how he lived. He went out among the people, and said "the kingdom of God is like seed growing into a tree, under whose branches the animals find shelter. The kingdom of God is like the surprise of finding a coin in the mouth of a fish in the sea - who was expecting that? Who was expecting ever to be so surprised, surprised by love? The kingdom. The kingdom is like beginning to be able to see the mystery of our having come to be, and to say to it "Abba", "Daddy". The kingdom is like someone breaking bread, and putting it in your hands, and saying "This is for you". It's all about love. It's all about sharing, and delightful surprise that comes to us in the sharing. It's all about being with the other. And it's all done with a deep commitment to the freedom of the other to respond - because that's what love does.

As the God-person went about the world, offering love to the world, some were deeply skeptical - either thought there was a catch, or a bill still to pay, or that there was a lacking of sincerity - who knows? It is said "some worshipped him; but some doubted". Part of the story.

A somewhat poetically inclined writer called John later would say "he came to his own, and his own received him not; but to as many as did believe, he gave power to become the children of God". And indeed, in keeping with that poetic thing from John, around the God-person formed this wonderful, frail little group - people who'd become known as "disciples" - those who are taught, those who follow in the Way. Some became so enthralled that they tried to walk on water. Now, that didn't go all that well; he had to rescue them - but again, that's what love does - lifts the beloved up when she or he is drowning. He taught them how to feed multitudes with fish and bread. He taught them how to speak good news, and enable healing. He also taught them that they'd come across places and people where they wouldn't be welcome - and they'd be best just to respect that, shake some dust from their feet, and let things be. Because that's the freedom of others - and "what've we got to do to make you love us?" It doesn't work that way. Love is never imposed - it simply is offered in freedom. That's what love does. That's what love does.

As the God-person continued his giving of self in the world, it began to become clear to some of those close to him that this was going to get costly. Some of the loved and close ones began to fear for his sake. You know, don't you, Teacher, that trees can be fashioned into crosses. You know, Rabbi, that some people are

violent. You know, Son of Man, that goodness doesn't always win. And they told him to step away, to disengage, to think of *himself* for a change. But there's this old reading, that maybe rattles around in the back of his mind - the God of Hosea saying "How can I give you up, Israel? My heart won't let me do it?" No, his speech fills up with dark shadows of commitment - undying commitment. He can't force them to love him; but nor can they stop him from offering his love. Paul later will say "love abides", and John later will say "having loved them, he loved them to the end". Sometimes love must let go; but it is what it is; self emptying itself, for the other, the other who is free, because it loves.

Well, time went on, and the people of the God-person learned, sharply, that love is sometimes, indeed, unrequited. Sometimes there is nothing to be done, to make them love him. He didn't impose himself - ever - how can you?

And because of that, tragedy became part of the story - as did the mystery of what happened next. What happened next? Next they hear a voice, sounding like him, and saying "peace be with you". Next they see a face, looking like him, showing itself among them again. They find themselves, as if on a high mountain (some worshipping, some doubting - what's he got to do to make them love him?), forming this conviction that whatever they have seen in him, have lived around him, have come to hope through him, now needs to be shared with the world, as if he still lives. It is not to be withdrawn, it's not to be cancelled, kept away from the world. It is to be given - given to all nations. It is indeed a loving and *great* commission: offer, in love, the love that has been received - share that holy kiss - see the life of Christ, in all its fullness, and in all its self giving, in all its respect of freedom as a holy kiss.

Should the people of the God-person take the love, the kiss of God, to the world that God loves, and should they stumble upon the state of Minnesota, they'll find cars on fire and shop windows broken. They'll find a makeshift shrine marking the place where someone called George declared that he could not breathe, and where nevertheless that Law imposed its will on his neck. He will find people, withered by experience after experience of stuff being imposed on them, as if they are not free, crying for freedom, while those who govern them from the capital city speak of ominous weapons, savage dogs, and "this behaviour stopping right here and right now" - while the good book is waved from a porch that was cleared by tear gas. God, the people ran away with tears in their eyes - and with tears in their eyes. That governance speaks only in the language of imposition. Another way is needed; another life needs living; another teacher needs to speak. Just be careful, dear church, as you take upon

that role of the teacher embodied in us, that as that other voice finds voice, that it is consistent with the way the God-person always speaks. It offers itself, does not impose itself. It knows that love can never be forced, only offered. And it has faith that sometimes, from that offering, new life and community come forth. It's the manifestation, in reality, of the story that began with the God noticing that the world was good, and wanting to be a closer part of that goodness.

Ah, we know, don't we, people of God, that sometimes our great commission, our going out into the world, baptizing as we go, hasn't worked so well in the world, for the world. Sometimes, we've gone, selectively, out only into parts of the world that have oil and diamonds that we could use. And other times we've taken not so much of the love, but more of the Victorian Western morality - by which indigenous peoples have been told to cover their breasts and put on their trousers. Sometimes we've found people kissing, and we have told them that their kissing is shameful, and not in the manner of Jesus - and really must stop. Sometimes we've also have said "you must speak English, and not the language you heard your grandmother speak". This is what we've done to make you love us. But that is imposition, and nothing to do with love. It's nowhere near the holy kiss that God might extend to the world.

And so, on a Sunday morning, a group of disciples, once locked down, have been given freedom to move around the world a little bit more. They have used that freedom to come together, where they have heard news of the better way of love offering itself in freedom. Will this help them live . . . in a new-spirited way? Will it make their exploration of the world a next chapter in the story of the God-person who offers himself in love and freedom? Will it let them extinguish the burning cars of Minnesota, and re-glaze the broken windows? Will it let them learn, and perhaps become imperfectly proficient in a language that is other than the language of imposition?

Good questions! As I was fond of saying during the Season of Lent: "I don't know". Do you know? O God, I hope so.

We keep a moment of quiet.

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