

## Sermon Archive 300

Sunday 28 June, 2020

Knox Church, Christchurch

A Series of Readings and Reflections

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



### Preamble

A few weeks ago, we explored the referendum matter of the recreational use of cannabis. At the end of that service, most people felt that the topic had been usefully aired, and nobody was very agitated. I got the sense that the topic, while topical, wasn't really of great concern to us.

This referendum seems, already, to be different. I've had conversations with some of you already, and I've discovered that this topic is "closer". Many people in this room today have been through the painful experience of watching loved ones suffer and die. Some have experienced loved ones giving away the gift of life too soon (suicide), and are left wondering what could have been done differently. Some have given years of love to supporting relatives who've been dismissed by society as not being worth keeping alive - and yet who have kept them alive. The people sitting next to you may have experienced grief that you cannot imagine - or maybe can.

At the end of the Wednesday morning Bible Study group, where we discuss the Sunday readings, we kind of realised that this topic wasn't so much an academic exploration of a "social issue", as much as it was a reflection on how to do the right thing for those suffering ones whom we love - how to protect, help, keep, release those whom we love - very personal, and raw. At the end of these readings and reflections, we'll come across Micah's assertion that doing the right thing by God is doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God.

What does Micah's famous injunction mean in an order when life is given, life is taken, sometimes life is forfeited; when life is lovely or life is hard - and we're all tangled up into our living and dying, by the bonds of love?

Your vote is yours. Albert Edgar Hardy, one's great grandfather, will never be able to "tell" you how to use it. But before the voting, comes the searching of the heart.

-ooOoo-

What follows now is a series of readings, reflections, and singing. We'll look at the vision for life and death, a good example of a full and wonderful life, a painful

and tragic end to a life, and a thought about what "God" requires of us.

**The First Lesson:** Psalm 104: 27-30

**A Reflection:** The grand plan: breath given, and taken

People come into being. **You** did, didn't you? One day you just woke up, and there you were! It's not something you organised. Simply, it just was something that happened to you. So, you entered this whole experience of being human as someone whose existence was a given. You could call it a gift - or you could call it an accident. What you call it will kind of depend on how you see the world. But, whatever - whether it came to us as a gift or as an accident, we tend to hold closely onto what we've got in our hands for this little while - our existence! We feed it, water it, shade it from the sun! We bless it, tell it some stories, walk with it - maybe offer it to others! It's good, isn't it?

Within the holding onto life, some of us procreate. We buy furniture and make homes. Some of us compose music and write poems. Some run fast. Some paint pictures. Some theorise black holes and ponder how light travels.

This thing called life is a lovely stage upon which all super-creative manner of stuff goes down. Part of the story is looking to feed and nurture it all -

And part of it is to acknowledge that it's not forever. When the One who gives life in the first place, takes away their breath, they die, and return to the dust. Someone else, someone next, now will need to house our furniture and take up our song.

There it is. Made beautiful. Made strong. Made lovely, creative and adventurous. But then to return to the dust.

There is no scandal in dying. No outrage. It's just how it is for people of flesh. We all will die. It is one of those inevitable things, that the breath once given, later is taken. Such is life.

We give thanks that we ever came to be.

**Hymn:** Give thanks for life

**The Second Lesson:** Deuteronomy 34: 1-12

**A Reflection:** A good result on the ground

On this particular occasion, God breathed life into one particular person, and there was a man called Moses. Bless him! If you'd read the whole of his story, you'd have seen that he was exquisitely imperfect. He got angry. He acted violently. He never spoke well.

But over the many years through which he led his people, slowly he found a place in their hearts. Early on, they'd complained that he'd led them to

nowhere. Now, many years later, they mourn his passing. There was something about "shared life" that brought them close to one another - and maybe even softened their judgment of his many failings.

When, finally, God took the breath away from him, and he died, they buried him somewhere in the land of Moab. No one quite knows where. The forgotten location is no indication of a lack of care. We're told that the people left behind mourned him for a good long time.

We're told, also, that they remember him as someone who'd lived long, and whose eyesight still was good. It's said that his vigour was not abated - and I leave the interpretation of that to your imagination.

We're left with the image of a nation giving thanks for a man who lived a long and good time, and who, though mourned by those he's left behind, was seen as having done his proper time as a person of the flesh. God gave breath - and it lasted well for as long as the times required. When the breath was withdrawn, and Moses died, although everyone mourned him, nothing seemed wrong with that.

Long, vibrant, full of years, inspired and inspiring, doing mighty deeds right until the end. It was such a long and good life, that when it's over, it just seems lovely and right.

Isn't that how it should be? Sometimes, life and death kind of make sense. The problem isn't death.

**Hymn:** This day God gives me

**The Third Lesson:** John 19: 25b-30

**A Reflection:** Gathering around the cross

The death of Moses, though naturally sad, wasn't such a problem. Here's a different scene.

Jesus isn't old; he's young. He shouldn't be dying. He's in terrible pain. One of the things he does from the cross is declare that he's thirsty. And the caring people around him do their best - sending a sponge of sour wine to attend to his thirst. So, even within a situation of dreadful injustice, he calls for relief, and good people try to bring him relief. We **want** to relieve the pain.

What's interesting as John tells the story of Jesus' death (which is meant to be all about Jesus, the focus on Jesus), is that, for just a moment, he shifts the attention to two people who are there - watching, interacting with the hideous death. Jesus has words, from his suffering, for Mary, his mother, and for the one simply described as "the one whom Jesus loved" - some

young man whom Jesus loved.

The death is ghastly - but present in it, horrified, looking on and wondering what to do, are his mother, and the one he loves. Words he casts down from his cross are words designed to bring them together. That a hideous death might bring the loved ones closer together, rather than further apart? I don't know.

What I do know, is that no one wants to watch someone they love suffer. No one wants a death of Jesus, rather than a death of Moses. But his mother, and the one whom he loves, walk away from the hideous death, forming a new family, and taking a new care of one another. The death creates a new community, a new commitment to being together - to doing things better, to loving, to caring in a more powerful way.

The Bible is full of stories of deaths that create vengeance, and retribution. The Bible is full of deaths from which no one learns anything. **This** death, the hideous, unjust, early death of Jesus, reveals that his love has seeped through to others - that death is to be negotiated, always, in love.

Some give him sour wine. Some watch, because that's all they can do. Death calls them to bond, and to love one another. Could it be that love is the best thing we can bring to the dying of another?

**Hymn:** Brother, sister, let me serve you

**The Fourth Lesson:** Micah 6: 6-8

**A Reflection:** Conscience: loving mercy and walking humbly with God

Micah, the prophet, wants to simplify things. To a people confused about what the religious Law requires, (offerings here, sacrifices there, how old does the calf need to be, how many rivers of oil need to be provided in the temple), he kind of strips things away - and strips them away to the level of the heart. What does God want? God want us to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God.

Justice might indeed mean standing up for our vulnerable ones, whom the system would rather have off the books. But in other instances, **kindness** might be letting them go - especially if the end is inevitably soon anyway, and pain is huge. What **is** it to be kind?

And what does it mean to walk humbly with God - humility being a general state of willingness to learn, to find a new way - as we wend that way along the ways of justice and kindness? God gives life. God eventually takes away the breath. Everyone hopes for a long life like Moses. Sometimes we come across a death like that of Jesus. In the death of Jesus, people are formed for a new community. And we're left wondering about justice and kindness, and what it means to be humble before the God who opens this all to us.