

## Sermon Archive 301

Sunday 5 July, 2020

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Matthew 11: 16-19, 25-30

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



The institution, a tradition-bound preparatory school, takes pride in its capacity to get its young men ready to leap the admission bars into medical school, law school, business school, and the like. Its young men bring honour to their Alma Mater by excelling in the professions, and sometimes, having made good, make nice donations to her.

So the school is a serious place, and the parents who send their sons to learn there, are serious people. What they require from the students is serious attention - and no lack of discipline. The education is costing a fortune, so young men need to be serious.

In this serious place, as a guide to the serious people, is a book. The book has white pages, upon which is written black ink. It's an artifact of black and white. On page 21, of the editor's introduction, a formula is printed. The formula is designed to give almost mathematical clarity on the woolly matter of greatness in English poetry.

J. Evans Pritchard writes: *to fully understand poetry we first must be fluent with its metre, rhyme and figures of speech, then ask two questions: (1) how artfully have the objectives of the poem been rendered, and (2), how important is that objective. Question one rates the poem's perfection, and question two rates its importance. Once these questions have been answered, determining the poem's greatness becomes a relatively simple matter. If the poem's score for perfection is plotted on the horizontal of the graph, and its importance is plotted on the vertical, then calculating the total area of the poem yields the measure of its greatness. A sonnet by Byron might score high on the vertical, but only average on the horizontal. A Shakespearean sonnet, on the other hand, would score high both horizontally and vertically, yielding a massive total area, thereby revealing the poem to be truly great. As you proceed through the poetry in this book, practise this rating method. As your ability to evaluate poems in this manner grows, so will your enjoyment and understanding of poetry.*

This formula has guided the young men of the school for years. It's been part of the tool box, by which they've been readied to pass exams and get into professions. For these purposes, the formula has worked.

A new teacher arrives in the classroom. He asks one of the boys to read the formula out loud, while he illustrates the graphing technique on the blackboard. Some of the boys copy the graph into their exercise books, because it might be useful for the exam. This is a serious matter.

After a short silence, the teacher, a new teacher, says *"Excrement! That's what I think of Mr J. Evans Pritchard. We're not laying pipe; we're talking about poetry. How can you explain poetry like American Bandstand? I like Byron, I give him a 42, but I can't dance to him. Now I want you to rip out that page. Go on, rip out the entire page. You heard me, rip it out. Rip it out."*

*In this class, you will learn to savour words and language . . . (You will learn to think for yourselves.) No matter what anyone tells you, words and ideas **can** change the world. We don't read and write poetry because it's cute. We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race, and the human race is filled with passion. And medicine, law, business, engineering, these are noble pursuits, and necessary to sustain life; but poetry, beauty romance, love - these are what we stay alive for . . . The powerful plays goes on, and you may contribute a verse. What will your verse be?*

Inspired by this new teacher, some of the boys begin to read poetry for its own sake. The until-now dormant parts of their creative personalities begin to wake up. They feel a new excitement. One of them joins a drama group, learns lines and actions to turn a stage into a world. He loves it, as he comes to life.

His father, however, soundly disapproves. He considers all this poetry and acting a serious distraction from getting ready for Med School. He reminds his son that education is expensive. He reminds him who is paying for this education (O, dear, his son will eventually sorely pay), and he forbids him from involvement in the play. He also lays a complaint with the school, which hangs the teacher out to be dried. The teacher of the "sucking the marrow out of life" is fired.

Some cultures don't cope well with creativity and life. They become grumpy when people rejoice and flourish and live. John Cleese, somewhat famously

described a Scottish Presbyterian as "someone who has a nasty, sneaking feeling that someone, somewhere, is having a good time".

Reflecting on how his ministry had been received by some, Jesus says "the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners". He's proven too full of life and celebration for the serious people to take him as a serious religious figure. They want him in a more funereal mode. Well, that's what they **say** - though Jesus knows that wouldn't please them either. For funereal, they'd already had John the Baptist, with his serious demands and austere approach. He'd given them the hair-shirt life - until they claimed he had a demon - was off his rocker, had nothing realistically religious for them to adopt.

It leaves Jesus wondering. If they don't want life as celebration, and they don't want life as seriousness, what **do** they want? Do they know what they want?

Indeed, the image that comes to Jesus' mind is the image of children arguing. Jesus, we played you a funeral dirge, and you didn't mourn. John, we played you a wedding song, and you didn't celebrate. You're not responding to the lead we're giving - so we won't play the game.

Could it be, that one of the unspoken rules of the games they play, is that **they** get to set the tune. And it doesn't matter whether the tune is happy, or sombre. The important thing is that **they're** the ones setting it. The thing that really offends them may be the freedom, the independence, the strength of character and vision, of these figures like Jesus and John. Jesus and John know who they are; they're living it out who they are, with complete integrity. And they won't adjust who they are (serious or celebratory), just because the bickering children play another tune. The powerful play of God, with all its different players, is going on . . . And these two men, almost polar opposites, are writing their verses for God. It's free verse, and freeing, for those who are willing to let them sing with their very own voices - while wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.

-ooOoo-

At this point of writing the sermon, I paused to make a cup of tea. I drank the tea from a Royal Albert bone china cup. The cup had pictures of red flowers on it. It sat on an equally lovely saucer, that wasn't really required. I used a tea

pot, rather than put a single tea bag in a mug. It was a silly little ritual - quite unnecessary - because surely the tea tastes the same whether it's prissy or plain?

Drinking my tea, I thought about these people whom Jesus described - how they seemed to want to set the tune for everyone else to sing - even for God to sing. People who don't really know what they want, other than that they want to be in charge. I found myself wondering what it must be like, going through life, feeling like you need to turn everyone else into a smaller, more compliant version of yourself - and the frustration of taking that seriously, when it's never going to work, because God will be who God is, as will those made by God, be who they are, and what they're like. The burden of trying to be in charge of the world, when you're not - and when wisdom and life only seem to come forth when integrity is given room.

For these people, (and for their likeness which emerges from time to time in any one of us), I wonder what Jesus would want to do. Well, I think he would want to carry on singing his song - singing from who he is, in God. He would carry on rejoicing when that enabled good deeds to emerge from others. And I think he would probably want to help them release the burden they feel to rule the world. Such an awful burden. Don't feel you need to carry it. Jesus will be Jesus. John will be John. You can be you. And they? Well, they can be them. Let's give ourselves to humbleness of heart. Let's let ourselves be, and take a rest.

-ooOoo-

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The drunkards and tax collectors pour a cup of tea; and we take a rest. A moment of quiet.

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