

Sermon Archive 303

Sunday 26 July, 2020

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



To what can the kingdom of God be compared? Yes, there are seeds growing into trees - in which birds make their homes. There are leavened loaves, rising in the oven. There are fish in the sea, with each being sorted into good and bad, and sifted hither and yon. Yes, indeed.

And in the middle of the metaphors, there are these two wee parables: one has someone finding a field with treasure in it - going off to sell all he has, so he can keep that field he's found. And another one, who comes across a pearl of great price - something beautiful - a sparkly, precious thing. He's been searching a long time, to no success. But now this pearl says "I am it", "this is the time. Use what you have, who you are, to embrace me".

So, for a sermon, I have two made-up characters, a wee meditation on those who encountered Jesus, and maybe word of reassurance.

-ooOoo-

I am a made-up character (a thought experiment). I am not the recently resigned member of parliament for Rangitata - although some people tell me I must be. I remember the first time I spoke in the house. Maiden speeches are introductions, really - a chance to say where you're from, and what's important to you. I remember looking up into the gallery, and seeing my family there - excited and proud. And I remember thanking them. It had been hard work getting into parliament, and for all they were, and all they'd done, they deserved my thanks. So, I told the story of our journey and our plans. And as is the custom for maiden speeches, members of the house listened politely.

I remember when I'd finished, sitting down again, while the next member introduced herself. Some of the things she was saying were similar to what I'd said - and they sounded plausible enough. I did find myself pondering the fact that quite a few members of the public (and maybe a few of the older, more

jaded members in the chamber) would be listening to us with the ears of cynicism - dismissing the words as falsely humble empty words, delivered by people veiling their ambition. "You know, they only seek office for the power and the money", they think. All that talk of vision and public service and improving the country . . .

I remember thinking how awful it would be to be that cynical - and I have to say that even now, I've never quite been that dismissive of honest motive. I say "even now". Now is a time following the reception of the Debbie Francis review into bullying and harassment in the New Zealand parliamentary workplace. The researchers and experts have started to articulate how the place isn't always a good place to be. And is it? It's sometimes a fine line between the anecdotal and the empirical - what makes something a story, and what makes it a real trend? Numbers? Well, I have joined the numbers - and people are saying that the numbers are speaking for themselves.

Well, the work hours were really long. And the office was in Wellington - not where my family lived. And the system was based on argument - and winning the argument. It all nurtured the combative spirit. Argue, win, take. But you know, like I said, it was hard work to get into that job - so you've got to be committed. You can't let the weak or the wobbly get in your way. Keep your eye on the prize - focus, work, take every opportunity!

"Even now", I said. Even now. While the whole country was watching, I fell from grace. I was spit on the wind - a hock of mucus flying back home, never to return. They made the point that I was fired, ejected - compelled by public opinion / revulsion. Initially the press were most unkind, then left me alone because they needed to focus on the next one to fall. Isolated anecdote - no way. I like to think that somewhere along the line, I realised what I was becoming. And that, while in the end I had no choice other than to go, I was working out that this was not what I wanted - a subtle learning moment - ah ha, this role I'd sought, worked hard to claim, was not the glittering of gold.

And now, in my recuperation, part of what I need to do is work out what I **do** want - for myself, and for those whom I've hurt. I need to keep looking for the treasure that so far has remained hidden, the pearl I haven't yet found. Speak to me, Jesus. Although I don't exist - remember I'm just

made-up - speak to me, Jesus. The end.

-ooOoo-

I am the second made-up character. I was doing all right. When our daughter was born, I was in quite a good job. There was quite a lot of evening work, but that was OK, since evenings paid really well. From the very first meeting with the doctors, they made the point that this wasn't going to be easy - she had multiple needs that couldn't really be met. The best thing might have been to put her into care. Professional care would have a better chance at meeting her needs, and it would allow **us** to have a life. That may indeed have been the case. But I remember feeling absolutely certain (while they surrounded us with options), that **this** was for me to do. She was for me to be.

I resigned from the evening job, so I could be with her. The daytime job wasn't nearly as well paid - and not so rewarding. People no longer said "wow", when I spoke about work. But the lowlier job made me more available as a parent - a "special needs" parent. From the "special needs" parent, the world re-distances itself. There's that look at the supermarket when the special need involves moisture. There's that "take the child away" when she freaks out because the mall is noisy or far too bright. It's amazing how complete strangers seem to feel so free to judge your parenting. And of course, the social workers continuing to remind you that there are options for care. And of course, the medical people pointing out that treatment is not compulsory - there are other medical options - you don't have to spend your life in ways that later you'll resent.

I never resented her. She made me a better person - more patient, more strong, more soft. I look back with great gratitude, that from that first hearing of the news, I **knew** that this was my pearl of great price. Yes, technically there were options - but there weren't really. As I sold all the other things I had, to get that field full of treasure, as I parted with many possessions and possibilities, I had complete clarity that this was my finding of that which needed to be found. Some may process their regrets and cry "Jesus, speak to me". But for me, Jesus already had spoken.

Just a wee reminder: I'm totally made-up - completely a thought experiment.

The end.

-ooOoo-

Not completely made-up are countless real human beings, each at a different stage of life, journeying through the days we've been given. Along the way we come across value systems and other people's thoughts about what should be our priorities. We dance with these priorities, and they shape us as we go. We take up some things, and let go of other things - and in a lot of ways it has the feel to it of a guessing game, a set of "what-if" sliding doors.

Among the race of the human travelers are rare individuals who speak of moments of clarity - who feel as if Jesus has spoken. Twelve disciples, who in the physical presence, decided to get up and follow. People like Paul, who in the mystery of a numinous encounter, set aside his previous persecution, to take up nurturing the heresy. People like Francis of Assisi, who gave away his clothes to restore a disused chapel. People like prisoner 7089, who incarcerated in Birmingham Prison, Alabama, knew this was NOT the time for being patient. Moments of clear understanding about priorities in life - having heard the One who speaks of pearls of great price, and treasure discovered in the field.

I am 56 years old. What is my treasure? You may be 90. What is yours? He may be ill and anxious - what is the pearl to be held? She may be wearying of her work? For what should she search? And the young ones . . . mapping and planning their many possible trajectories, what is it that they might discover in joy? Not-made-up characters, making life up as we go. Jesus says to them "to what may the kingdom of God be compared?" Pearls and treasure being found - something beautiful being seen - coming to know what life is for . . .

We keep a moment of quiet.

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