

Sermon Archive 306

Sunday 16 August, 2020

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: Isaiah 56: 1, 6-8
 Romans 11: 1-2a, 29-32

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



With deep affection and respect, he carries with him, in his heart and mind, the stories of his ancestors - his people. He cherishes remembering the special blessing they perceived - their almost incredulous apprehension that their life was resting on kindness - that God had singled them out - said to them "I choose you - now come and walk with me". Yes, over the years particular forms of worship and living had been given - daily prayers and ways of dressing - expressions of being different, special. But at the heart of it all was the humbled surprise, the quiet delight, the feeling of amazement that God had said "hello, come walk with me".

So, there he is, with his heart and mind full of a sense of all that. There he is, walking along his road of life. He walks imperfectly. Of course he does: he's only human. Sometimes he forgets to pray. Sometimes he omits the ritual by which he might say "thank you" to the heaven that calls him. And sometimes, to be honest, his gratitude for being different, tends towards a smugness - even arrogance. There's something about knowing you're special that requires special caution. Best seats at the table, prayers that are a wee bit full of the sound of the voice - a tendency not to share the crumbs with the puppies under the table. He knows he's imperfect. But if we pay him the courtesy of a forgiving assessment, we'll see that his better self is grateful to God, and faithful in his amazement that God continues to say "hello".

One day, someone says to him "that's all over". None of your rituals mean anything anymore. They are like filthy rags. Someone says "I am taking it away from you, and giving it to someone else. You're no longer special. God is saying "hello" now to someone else.

Why? What? Man! What's he meant to do with this? I mean, protest? Get angry - get even. Be sad? Bargain it back? No, disbelieve it - it can't be right.

The spoiler is lying - God is faithful, the family story is true - always has been, always will be. No this news of God saying "hello" to someone else is fake news. Propaganda, heresy. Take it away!

The suggestion, however, is not taken away. It persists. In confusion and pain, he forms the question "has God rejected his people?" Paul writes the question down, and centuries later we hear it.

Much of Paul's letter to the Romans gives itself to thinking through what the new faith, the way of Jesus, meant for the old faith, the way of the covenant. Did God's new way of speaking leave the old way of speaking with nothing to say, or no one to hear it? Had the family of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob become redundant?

It's more than an academic religious question - more than an entertaining systematic theological brain teaser. It's a tender spot in the heart of the people. Do we not matter anymore? Are we not significant? We had so much, and now we don't. Can it be true that we have lost the blessing? One cannot underestimate the depth of sadness accompanying those who are told about the new expression of faith.

-ooOoo-

My first reading into the topic of the Reformation of the Western Church was from books that rather over-simplified things. The enlightened Protestants discovered the truth, and responded intelligently. They perceived the truth in the scriptures. They acted with motives that were noble and pure. They stripped away from faith all that was distraction and compromising. They recovered Jesus from the clutter and priceless works of art kept in galleries of corruption. The new way, the reformed way, made perfect sense and would be the obvious choice of anyone with half a brain. That's the story I read.

A kindly teacher of church history asked me why, if this was so, that not everybody joined the reformation. And by "everybody", he didn't mean the highly compromised leadership who had shares in the art galleries; he meant the ordinary people who thought the statues were beautiful, who enjoyed the smell of incense. He meant the people singing the prayers and kissing the feet of the crucifix. He meant the people noticing the shafts of light coming through the coloured glass. He meant the people for whom plain architecture and serious preaching felt like the loss of the blessing. This new way didn't make them feel part of anything special. This reform felt like the loss of the

special blessing. We had something beautiful, and now we've lost it. Is this God rejecting the people? It's not an academic thing. It's a feeling of loss within the heart of the people.

Two weeks ago, I felt like I was one of a chosen people - people living with a rare blessing. In my safe and special country, tucked away at the bottom of the world, I knew that we had chosen a good way, and were doing well as a result. As for those poor Victorians, over the ditch, they'd got it wrong - seriously wrong. As for the Americans - that's what you get when you elect incompetents. It's not their fault - but it is. Like our Everyman from the opening of the sermon, sometimes a sense of being specially blessed can morph into a kind of arrogance. I never said I was perfect. But we sure as hell had a blessing not possessed by those people over there.

Then community transmission - and a sense of having lost a blessing. Is God rejecting the people?

Perhaps I'm being overly dramatic - melodramatic even! But during the week I felt something like grief - like something had been lost. So yes, I think it's fair to say the question "has God rejected the people" kind of fits. Paul asks the question, we hear the question. I think we also "feel" the question.

You may have noticed that there are missing verses in today's reading from Romans. We go straight from verse 2 of chapter 11, to verse 29. In those missing verses, Paul considers the shared experience of the Jews and the Gentiles. Both have sought God. Both have got some things right. Both have got other things wrong. Both have experienced losing blessings along the way. Both have learned that what we have comes to us not so much by works, as by grace. And in all of that, we are not "us and them"; we are keepers of irrevocable gifts - shoulder to shoulder in mercy. We are all people living in a world in which God speaks to all.

Do you think it would be good, perhaps, if I could come out of my experience of loss with a heightened sense of sympathy for, solidarity with the people of the world? Do you think it would be good if I no longer saw America as a basket case, and Victoria as a management debacle - but as people with whom I shared a need of grace? The new faith, the letting go of the old ways, as a way into deeper human unity?

Indeed, as Isaiah imagines the coming of salvation, the dawning of things as they ought to be, part of the picture involves finding room on the mountain

for the foreigners - for what Isaiah calls the gathering of the outcasts. The coming reign of God is about the house being the house of prayer for all peoples. There is a sense of people being welcomed into the kindness - thus, we are told says the "Lord God".

I think this is a good image to sit with at the moment - for the moment is a time when fears about isolation have gained some momentum. I was meant to be flying to Auckland this afternoon to spend time with friends and my mother. That is something that will not be happening. And as people process anxiety, there seems to be an increase in blaming and shaming. On Thursday, Ashley Bloomfield, of the Ministry of Health, found himself having to say *"there is no blame or shame in having Covid-19. The virus is the problem, not people who have contracted it. They did not ask to catch it, and in the same way as you never ask to get a cold or flu in the winter, the virus is the problem; people are the solution."*

If we were to be part of the solution, then, in a time of loss, perhaps we should be giving some commitment to treating people not as problems, but as brothers and sister within the love. Perhaps we should give time, and attention, to making people feel more connected, rather than disconnected. Perhaps we could do things like Skype people in lockdown, get Auckland on the phone - gather in spirit with those who might feel like they're outcasts - or if not outcast, then at least a little bit sad. Has God abandoned the people? Have we lost the blessing? No; not if the people still care!

Soon we will offer prayers for the world. But for now, we keep a moment of quiet.

The Knox Church website is at: <http://www.knoxchurch.co.nz.html> . Sermons are to be found under News / Sermons.