

Sermon Archive 309

Sunday 6 September, 2020

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Revelation 21: 1-7

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



In a pot, by my front door, is a plant. I can't tell you exactly what kind of plant is. It would have been written on the label when I bought it at the garden centre, but that's long since been thrown away. When I leave the house, I tend to leave by car, because, like many creatures of the twenty-first century, I'm addicted to motor propulsion. Coming and going through the garage, then, I seldom use the front door. So I do not regularly see how the plant in question is going. Further, because the front door, where the plant is, is set within a sheltered alcove, rain seldom falls on the plant.

On a rare journey through the front door the other day, I came upon a brittle twig in a pot. It was the remains of the plant in question. Not wanting any visitor to my house to be met at the door by a sign of death and neglect, I decided the plant needed replacing. I prepared my secateurs and trowel. Before a new plant could come, the old one had to go. Replacement. I unclipped the secateurs and looked for the best place to make the cut. Right near the bottom of the stem, I found a tiny shoot of green. It said to me, "please; I am a living thing".

I said back to it "yes, you are". And I decided to prune it, rather than to remove it. I chose to feed it, rather than to replace it. It's a living thing, and I need to (more than give it a chance), give it my apology and responsibility. It hadn't killed itself - I had neglected it. It had almost died on my watch, and I was about to throw it away. "Indeed, you are a living thing", I said; "and it is for me to care for you".

-ooOoo-

Here's another story, a parable if you like, about something almost being thrown away. By virtue of being born, he was given the gift of a body. He

was an embodied thing. Initially the body was small and couldn't get around the world by itself. But that was OK, because his parents took him around with **them** - and tended to anything he needed. Over time, the body grew and became capable of more things. It could run and jump, take biscuits from the biscuit jar. Over more time, it got much bigger, grew hair in strange places and caused him not always to sleep well at night. One day he realised that he was as tall as his father, and capable of lifting the heavy tools in the workshop. Not that he was staying in the workshop. He was about and about in the world, meeting people, drawing lines in the dust, overturning tables, breaking loaves in two. And goodness me, this is where the body took a beating. It was whipped. It was beaten. It was forced to carry a huge piece of wood. It was cut and pierced. Near the end, when they came to put it out of its misery, they discovered that it was dead. So they ordered it to be taken down, and put away. Maybe it is time to give up on this one - too badly damaged. Might be time to start again, declaring love to the world again, through someone else.

So the story goes, a voice comes to it, saying "you are, to me, a living thing. I will feed you; I will fill you; I will make you live." So, one Easter he goes back into the world. Because this is kind of confusing for those to whom he goes, he does lots of reassuringly human things. He eats fish - to show he's got a stomach. He breathes upon them, to show he's got lungs. He tells one of them to put a hand into the gaping wound in his side. It's as if he thinks it's important to show them that this is not someone new; it's not someone else; it's the same old body - just filled with a life that is new. What's the story saying, I wonder. God doesn't replace him; God makes him new.

Here's another story, or maybe it's more properly a news story about religious trends in Latin and South America in the second half of last century. A movement began, at first constituting a priest or two, just a couple of nuns. Confronted with a growing poverty among the people around them, they started asking why the people were increasingly poor, when in other parts of the world there seemed to be a growing prosperity. They started latching onto concepts like God's particular

passion for the poor. They started stirring up protests, asking governments to govern differently, so that the people could live richer, fuller lives. The phrase coined for the movement was "Liberation theology" - the people need liberating. Some governments did not like liberation theology. Some of them did things in response to it like shooting bishops while they were consecrating bread - Bishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador. Other governments took a gentler, but quite cunning approach. They tried to undermine the Catholic church which housed the movement by pouring money into independent Protestant churches which said things other than liberation. The Protestant churches told the people to calm down, not be so upset about the unjust state of the world just now - because heaven, so much better than earth, was waiting. Don't focus on now; pray for a better later. Now is broken, badly broken, so let it go. It will be replaced, in time, by something else.

The sociologists and demographers got together with the statisticians, and noted that Protestant religion, particularly in the form of Pentecostalism and Evangelicalism, exploded. By the end of the century, particularly in Brazil and Guatemala, there were more Protestants than Catholics. The people were seemingly persuaded by the promise of quietism as the way into hope for the new thing.

The liberationists carried on their work, of course - because they believed in it. The Vatican, with various fleas in its ear, put in there by disgruntled presidents and ambassadors, didn't like it, and told them to stop it. There is some very famous video footage, from 1983, of Pope John Paul II scolding Nicaraguan priest, Ernesto Martinez. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VJDWSlsN5Nw>) The Pope shakes his finger at him, and calls him a communist. He soon would bar him from administering the sacraments. That ban stayed in place until it was removed 36 years later by someone called Jorge Bergoglio. Coming from South America himself, Bergoglio (also known as Pope Francis) perhaps could understand why Martinez felt he needed not to sit around waiting for heaven – giving up on the present - but had to do some work in the suffering here and now. The people were living things - they ought be

helped to live. Not waiting to die - but being helped now to live.

One commentator, whose reflections on Revelation I read during the week, a poor man called Eugene Boring, made an enlightened observation. He noted that Revelation's "voice from the throne" never said "I am making all new things", but "all things new". And the new Jerusalem isn't something other than the earth, but is something happening to the earth. **This** earth - not another. This God isn't throwing the old creation away and starting again. This isn't replacement of the dead; it's the renewal of what struggles to live. And when crying ceases and pain disappears, when it's as if God is present and all is well, it's happening **here**, to **us**, in the **very world** that we have cared for. This created order, this whole created order, is not expendable. It is not obsolete or disposable. It is calling to be made new.

On this first Sunday in this Season of Creation, it might be time for us to acknowledge that the world of which we are a part, and for which we have responsibility (the blue planet) is a living thing. And as such, it's capable of being damaged. It might be time **also** for us to acknowledge that God's way with the hurting creation is not to throw it away, to start again with some other creation, but to renew what already is.

You have one life. We have one world. It's all precious, and God's dream is to make it new.

-ooOoo-

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I said back to it "yes, you are; a 'one off', and it is for me to care for you". Making God's dream come true.

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