

Sermon Archive 311

Sunday 20 September, 2020

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Exodus 16: 2-20

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Early on Wednesday morning this week, I went out into my garden and found this strange white flaky stuff on the grass. I like to think, as I wondered about it, that I meant to say something kind of burning-bush respectful like "I must turn aside and see what this is"; but instead to myself (and to any god or prophet who might have been listening in), simply I said "What's that?" There was something in the way I phrased my question that came across as dismissive of what I was seeing. Clearly, I wasn't impressed with whatever it was. Flaky, white, on the ground, weird.

Ah well!

The Word of wisdom came to me. It told me that this weird thing was God's provision for me. Then it told me to stop complaining, gather it up (now) and share it (now).

Ughh.

-ooOoo-

The people believe that they're on their way to freedom. At this stage no one among them has received visions of the world being at peace, with lions and lambs sharing their straw, or children and snakes playing together quite happily. No vision's been given of the new Jerusalem coming down from the sky - for goodness sake the temple of the old Jerusalem hasn't even been built yet. These are early days. But the people **do** possess as sense of having been promised a home, and a future, and a world that around them **will** be good. The only trouble is that that good world is nowhere to be seen. The world has become for them a hostile and anxious experience. Going from here to there is requiring of them to spend time in an in-between wilderness - where the basic things they need to live are absent. In a parallel universe, perhaps their hills are on fire. Perhaps a virus is making them scared. Perhaps a job subsidy is expiring and no one knows the uncharted route to the nearest foodbank. Far out, things for the people are hostile.

One of the major issues the people face, these pilgrims on their way to better things, is that they don't have any food. Because they're vagrants on a journey, they can't plant crops. They have no store houses. They depend, day by day, on finding stuff around them - but they don't know what kind of environment it is here and today, let alone there and tomorrow. It's all very insecure. A commentator of their situation will describe them as being "united by insecurity, anxiety, and hunger".

Doing what most frightened people do, they complain then cry out for help. Who do they cry to? Everyone and no one! Moses, because he's there, and God, because that's what they did in Egypt. They sing their cotton-picking spirituals. They march their marches to monuments. They write their manifestos and their letters and papers from prison. With fear, spunk and longing, they name the hunger.

The next day, two things come to them. The first thing is a family of quails. Little birds, are quails - and contestants of Master-chef do wonders with them. Quite high cuisine these days. In those days, they're just little birds (morsel sized portions) - but so much better than hunger. The people of Israel know exactly how to process quails. They catch them, kill them and eat them. That's entirely obvious to a people who are hungry. Some of the provision (provided following the crying out to God) requires no decoding - you just do with it what comes naturally and fits the way you've always worked. Kill the quails, cook them, and eat.

But along with the quails, there's this flaky white substance. What's it about? No one quite understands it. Why doesn't it last longer than a day? How reliable is it? What does it mean? Nah; and it doesn't look like the kind of thing sufficient for what's looking like a journey of forty years.

Moses, the man of God, who articulates for the people of God, the voice of God, says that this strange flaky white thing is God's provision for them. This is the thing, which, along with the obviously edible quails, will make for them the difference between life and death, living and dying. What is it? No one knows.

-ooOoo-

Let's do an audit of the pantry of God. Quails are simple. Eggs are laid. They hatch and quails emerge. They wander into the camp, are caught, and like sheep and other birds are turned into food. And if you have salt, or brine, you

can preserve them and carry them along for the next part of the walk to freedom. (Or you could sell them to others in times of even greater scarcity - nice wee profit there.) Quails are consistent with the economy of hoarding and consuming.

But with his white flaky stuff (whatever it is), you can't do that. If you hold onto it for longer than a day, it doesn't work. It decays, turns to worms. You have to gather it, and share it with others right that day. It's only ever useful if you're a person who can share as soon as you receive. And yes, you can't get away from the basic fact that it's weird, and we don't know what it is, and it requires daily toil - every jolly day you just need to pick it up and make it work (laborious routine). Quails are easy consumer-ready consumables. But this weird white flaky stuff is coming from somewhere else.

Perhaps that's enough Bible story for now.

We are people of faith - not arrogant faith, but journeying faith, walking together towards some future that we trust is being given. And because on our landscape we find disease, and have seen massacre in the city, and fire on the hills, and repeatedly shaking earth, in many ways it all seems hostile. There is anxiety. I'm there. I'm among the people who sense the worry, and who from somewhere within form the "God save us" crying out - or at least form the complaint about our situation. I'm right there within the complaining, hungry people. Why are we always having to change our plans? What will tomorrow bring?

God sends me quails - the normal, usual, well mandated and natural ways of fending off some of what makes me anxious. God sends me the usual ways of hunting and eating - a house, an income, the natural gifts and skills I use to keep the wolf from the door. And I can save the quails up, put them in the bank, and become quite rich and future-safe in the saving. And I am grateful for that.

But what of this weird white and flaky stuff on the ground? The stuff that I can't identify, and can't keep, but have to share on the day? - this stuff that I'm told is equally part of God's provision for me, but which I still can't describe?

Dare one follow the claim that I can't describe it, with an attempt to do just that? Maybe not. That may just be silly.

Nevertheless . . . Non-commercial, less individual, more oriented around that which must be shared . . . not something you can save for tomorrow. Could that be a visit from your mother? A voice to put within the singing of the other singing people? An ear for an ancient story about people going through a wilderness? Blossom on a Canterbury tree (blows the wind, and it'll be gone)? An inkling that this larger thing within which we walk our life is good and expanding - and to do with touching the other person? Things of your mind and heart (that dancing heart) that you could keep to yourself, but would be better if given to others? A conversation with, or a being silent with, the mystery of the great I AM WHO I AM?

We look at these things, and in our candid lack of tact say "what is it", as if it's not much at all. But maybe these hard to describe things are the things that sustain the spirit of the people of God. And also maybe, if we extend the principles of the Bible story into the situation just a wee bit further, we'll find ourselves considering whether the things given to us, to sustain us, really have been given only to us, only on the basis that we really need to share them - not later if we find ourselves in times of surplus and plenty, but now - as we do the anxious thing together.

Well, the anxious thing . . . Donald Trump is in the White House. Covid-19 is in the world. Dilworth School is finding things out. Humanity experiences fear and hunger, compiles its anxieties. Yes, there are quails to be eaten, and for them we are grateful.

But early on Wednesday morning, I went into my garden and found this strange white flaky stuff on the grass. I like to think, as I wondered about it, that I meant to say something kind of burning-bush respectful like "I must turn aside and see what this is"; but instead to myself (and to any god or prophet who might have been listening in), simply I said "What's that?"

What is it? It is a call for me to consider the ways that I am sustained, blessed by indescribable things given daily, which I am called to share with others. We kill the quails but also ponder the mysteries - the things we cannot keep. By these we are fed. Thanks be to God.

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.