

Sermon Archive 312

Sunday 4 October, 2020

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Philippians 3: 4b-14

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



According to most chronologies of the New Testament, it is reckoned that Paul had his mysterious conversion experience around the year 33 CE. It also is reckoned that he was executed following a time of imprisonment in Rome around the year 63. So, in this passage from Philippians, written from jail, we have a man reflecting on his work, his personal journey, who he has become and what he values now, over a stretch of some thirty years. It got me thinking.

-ooOoo-

Thirty years ago, 1990, I kept a diary. I did this because I felt that it was going to be a year of some difference and worth remembering. I've spent a bit of time this week reading parts of the diary - re-visiting who I was. I was, essentially and student and a traveler. I'd been awarded an exchange scholarship at a German University, so found myself on the other side of the world, experiencing for the first time what it meant not to be very good at the local language. Little children could speak better German than I could, and sometimes would smirk at my communication efforts. It's hard, perhaps character-building (or spirit-destructive) when you feel less capable than a child. Technically, I was there to study theology, but it pretty quickly became evident to me that learning German was a higher priority. So I enrolled myself in all the German language groups I could access. One of those classes was taught by community volunteers, mainly elderly women, keen to do something constructive in their retirement. They were people of long memory and remarkable experience. One of them told us, in very simple German, so we could understand her, that as a child, before or during the war, she had been chosen by her youth group to present a bouquet of flowers at a rally to someone called Adolf Hitler. Looking back now, through the legacy of death and ruin, and grieving it all, she still has to say she'd never been that proud or

excited in all her life. Strange, confused, tangled times.

Listening into this was not just me, but the other students scrambling to make progress with German. At our first gathering, looking around the room, I was struck by how many of my "companions in learning" appeared to be Chinese. I wondered why German seemed so popular for Chinese. Well the reason was simple. The year before, there had been a incident in Tiananmen Square, Beijing. The government had cracked down on the pro-democracy protest movement. It's estimated that on 4 June, 1989, about four thousand people were killed. In the aftermath, realising that life in China was no longer an option, a great wave of Chinese (young Chinese in the main) fled and ended up making new homes in places like Germany - picking up new skills in speaking, in classes like the one I'd found.

They weren't the only refugees in the class. I remember two men from the Middle East, both called Mohammed. One seemed driven and haunted. One seemed possessed of a peaceful disposition. Both were displaced and were working hard to learn how to speak in their new situation. Peace is important. Security is important. Helping to equip others is important. Thirty years ago, I was learning, face to face with displaced others, that the world is more complicated than it had seemed on TV as I'd watched it (in English) at home.

After I'd finished at the German university, I spent time exploring Europe. With no mortgage to be serviced at home, and no job requiring me to return quickly, it made sense to make the most of being on the other side of the world. I those days no pandemic had closed any border, and I don't think I would have believed that it ever would - no European border, much less a Kiwi one. Travel was simple then. So I visited pubs and piazzas, museums and art galleries. I visited churches, palaces and gardens, and didn't throw a coin in the Trevi Fountain - because the Trevi fountain was closed for maintenance. Racing from thing to thing, highlight to highlight in some kind of equal and cancelling light, it was important to see it all. I saw things in a kind of box-ticking way. I had time, but I think I lacked patience. I was twenty seven.

At the end of my exploring, I ended up in Northern Ireland, the place from which my father had come. He came from there, to here, to begin a new

life at roughly the same age as I was during my exploring. Left behind in Northern Ireland were the rest of his family, many of whom I now was meeting for the first time. There was something in the meeting of them that made me feel connected in a way I wasn't expecting. It felt like the other half of myself I'd not quite noticed was incomplete, was being completed. At the time, I think I would have said that I was learning that family is important, that connections with place were important, that discovering whakapapa is important - although in those days I'd never have called it "whakapapa"; I'd have called it genealogy. Since then I've not kept in touch with any of the Irish family; so I guess I'd have to admit that I didn't learn whakapapa's importance. That may be something I need to re-learn sometime over the next thirty years. ("Not that I've attained it yet", says Paul - the work in progress.) And yes, I'd better get a move on, since in 30 years time, by the time I'm 87 (if I get that far), those family members are extremely unlikely to be around - they'll be out there somewhere getting on with sharing in the resurrection of Jesus.

There we are. That's the end of my reflecting on where I was thirty years ago. Maybe some time this afternoon, if you find a moment to get reflective, you could re-visit your 1990 self. You might ponder what you were doing - what you were hoping - what you thought then was important. I can promise you that if you do that, you'll come back to your present time aware of some things that have stayed the same, but also of the many things that have changed. It is true that human beings are journeying beings - we evolve, we develop new strengths and suffer new weaknesses. From mistakes and things well done we discover worthwhile things. We change; it really is a journey.

When Paul reflects on his previous self, he sees someone who felt confident in the flesh, proud of his having kept the law. He sees someone who's intelligent and educated, and who came from a good family. He sees someone giving huge amounts of energy to upholding the tradition and putting other people right when they stray from the way. He sees someone who felt a responsibility to punish the guilty and justify himself. And in this candid, honest piece of end-of-life writing, Paul notes that he's lost pretty much all of that - and he doesn't care, because somewhere along his

journey, he has learned from Christ, that none of that ever really mattered. What matters now is his discerning, his coming to know, the company of the one in whose presence we are softened as people, made more risen in heart and mind, made more grateful for what we have received by grace. In the presence of Jesus, we grow.

Are we there yet, Paul?

He says, "Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. One thing I do: forgetting what lies behind, and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call in Christ Jesus".

No longer defined by who he was, or what he thought then was important, free from all the constraints of the past, he's now letting himself be formed by hope, by promise, by the presence of One who loves us and makes us better.

There is a prayer I sometimes use at small communion services. I'm not sure where it came from. It goes: *Gentle us, holy One, into an unclenched moment, a letting go of heavy expectancies, of dead certainties, that, softened by the silence, and open to the mystery of [your presence], we may be found by wholeness, upheld by the unfathomable, entranced by the simple, and filled with the joy that is you.*

If I am given another thirty years of life, which I hope I will be, I hope that I will be able to look back on them with a sense of having being companioned by Christ, and somehow in that to have been "gentled". I won't be perfected. I won't be able to say "yes, I possess it" - like a trophy I've won. But if I can say that somehow I have come to know Christ, then God will have been good.

As our next thirty years begin, together we keep a moment of quiet.