

Sermon Archive 317

Sunday 8 November, 2020

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: Psalm 146

Matthew 5: 1-12

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



"The meek shall inherit the earth".

I was thrilled during the week to receive a letter, telling me that I had inherited the earth. I wasn't expecting to inherit the earth, so it was a nice surprise. I'm not sure where I'm going to put it, since the earth is quite big. Maybe I'll have to leave it where it is at the moment. I suppose if it's mine now, I should put my name on it - "this belongs to Matthew". I could set out some survey pegs, not because I own only part of it and not another part (I own it all). It's just a way of reminding others that I'm in charge of what they can and can't do, where they can and can't go. To that extent it's not really about earth per se; it's about my authority. I'll have to give that extra thought. Also needing a bit of thought, around that whole idea of inheritance, is who I'm going to leave it to when my time comes. No matter how princely I feel I am, I know that one day my breath will depart and they'll bury me in this earth I own. And you know, as an unpartnered man with no children, I'll have to work out a deserving next inheritor - to carry on my plan. I think I'll leave it to someone who'll use it well - not waste it. It's full of minerals, you know. It'd be a shame for those just to be left in the ground. And the seas are full of fish that could be eaten. And the air's just empty space, waiting for gases. I don't want the earth just sitting there at peace when it could be creating jobs and wealth. I'm not leaving it to any meek little quietist.

-ooOoo-

There was, of course, a treaty in place. It is said that some of the wording was lost in translation, meaning one thing to one people and another to another people. Wording is important, but so also is the spirit, the general

principles the words mean to enshrine. And these days, I guess, looking back, we'd be inclined to say that the spirit of things ought to have been obvious. Grabbing someone else's land - whether or not it's being used for fishing or mining or farming - or for living on - providing peaceful enjoyment - when that other person is unhappy about the grabbing, is a problem. Regardless of losses in translation of specific words, there was enshrined a principle of partnership. And if your partner is saying "Wo!", then it makes sense to stop and have a respectful conversation. It's not a failure of strength to dialogue. It's not a fatal excess of meekness carefully to listen.

In 1878, the New Zealand government began surveying some land in Taranaki. The idea was to divide it up for European settlement. Government surveyors went out with their sextants and survey pegs, and started creating boundaries. I imagine they knew their angles and observed their brief. The only trouble was that, on the land they were dividing, already lived a people - the people of Te Whiti o Rongomai and Tohu Kakahi.

In other parts of the country, when locals had become upset by land-grabs, war had ensued. Some dreadful violent conflicts had raged. Lots of people had died. And when you look at the breadth of human history, not just here on these shores, but pretty much anywhere on this earth we seek to inherit, war has been the way we've responded to theft, or greed, or differing ideologies, or anything really. This is the way of the princes of the earth - of "mortals in whom there is no help". I steal, you fight, escalation and blood and fall.

In Taranaki, in Parihaka in particular, that was not the way. There's debate as to how much the Parihaka approach was informed by Biblical principle (some say much, others say not much - although Te Whiti was widely known to be a keen reader of Christian scripture), but the Parihaka response was different. The people of Parihaka left their trumpets hanging in the hall, their patu and taiaha at home in the whare. They quietly went out onto their land, removed the survey pegs and ploughed it. Would you call that a meek approach? Or was it rather too assertive to qualify as "meek"? What does "meek" mean anyway. Can it ever be a way to inherit the earth?

Well, whether it was meek or not, it really irritated the crown. The Parihaka ploughmen were arrested and imprisoned. As they disappeared into prisons, more ploughmen arrived. They came from Patea, Whanganui,

Waikato, leaving behind in those places their previous strategies of armed resistance and taking up the ways of peaceful passive resistance. And so, more arrests and prison terms.

Somewhat frustrated by this awful peace that seemed to be flowing out from some subversive thinking in the settlement of Parihaka, the princes of the world (mortals in whom there is no help) sent troops into the settlement. On 5 November 1881, the people from Patea, Whanganui and Waikato were expelled (about 1,600 people). To stop others replacing them much of housing at Parihaka was burned down. Te Whiti and Tohu were arrested. After six months of detention, with the two men awaiting trial, the government passed legislation allowing for their indefinite detention. Sent to the beautiful Te Wai Pounamu, the South Island (although it's hard to appreciate the beauty of the land from inside a prison cell), Te Whiti and Tohu were released after two years. They returned to Taranaki and set to rebuilding Parihaka - not as a once-bitten twice-shy more violent expression of its former self, but again as a pacifist community. Te Whiti was arrested and removed again in 1886 - going back to Parihaka the following year, still a person of peace making a place of peace. He died in 1907, and his community continues to this day, meeting on the 17th or 18th day of each month to talk about the state of the world and what can be done peacefully for its good. There's this certain kind of dogged determination to all of this - which I'm not sure you can describe as meek. Or can you? Will they ever inherit the earth? No, when their breath departs they too will return to the earth. What will happen to their plans? And what of the meek? Is "meek" another case of loss in translation?

It's been a couple of thousand years since Matthew wrote down the beatitudes of Jesus. I wonder how they seemed to the first audience to receive them. That audience was living in an occupied territory. They were people whose land had been seized and whose pockets had been raided for taxes to support a government other than their own. They were a people well acquainted with power imbalances and the reality that sometimes the bad guy wins. Would they really have believed that the meek would inherit the earth? Were the beatitudes the apotheosis of "pie in the sky" uttered by a teacher divorced from reality?

Well, I suppose you could take them as such - if you believe that they're promises for a some far off future. Promises for the future . . .

Or how about we think about them a bit differently. How about we think about them as a protest song for the present - a kind of wero, challenge to the princes of the world, in whom there is no hope. Could the beatitudes be a defiant "no" to those who form our world by their ill-formed power.

- You say to me arrogance is the way. I say no, we seek poverty of spirit.
- You say to me mourning shall be yours. I say no, comfort is real.
- You say to me aggression is the key. I say no, meekness brings inheritance.
- You say to me wealth satisfies the soul. I say no, righteousness fills the spirit.
- You say to me mercy is weak. I say no, mercy is strong.
- You say to me go for guile. I say no, we shall celebrate purity of heart.
- You say to me war is the solution. I say no, blessed are the peacemakers.
- You say to me that persecution is the strategy. I say no. I just say no. To the persecution, with a defiant meekness, I just say no.

I hold the beatitudes of Jesus not as pie in the sky future. I hold these beatitudes as my protest song for now, for singing to the princes who would form our world, princes in whom there is no hope. Hope, rather, for us, is a menace moving a protest people to make another kind of world.

-ooOoo-

I was thrilled during the week to receive a letter, telling me that I had inherited the earth. I suppose if it's mine now, I should put my name on it - "this belongs to Matthew". I could set out some survey pegs. That would be a good way of reminding others that I'm in charge of what they can and can't do, where they can and can't go. I'm happy with that - until some wretched peace-menaced prophet says to me "No". Here is the way to blessing . . .

We keep a meek little moment of quiet.

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