

Sermon Archive 318

Sunday 15 November, 2020

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Matthew 6: 25-27

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



I'm on staff at Knox College in Dunedin. The College pays me for the work I do, and provides me with a little house. The house is somewhat grandly called "The Deanery", because the person inside it is a "Dean". I notice, in a recent photo that crossed my eye, it's now called "The Cottage" - a much more realistic name. Notwithstanding its lack of grandeur, it is a good home - sunny, warm, just enough room to contain my empire of things that makes it homely. Through most of the windows the view is of a carpark and the unattractive back end of a brick building, but through one window there's a pleasant stand of trees.

Anyway, just beyond the unattractive back end of the building across the carpark, a personnel restructuring is going on. Money needs saving it seems, and maybe, just maybe, an easier way needs to be found to move one or two people on. So human beings are being moved about on the strategy board - a bit like pieces on a chess board, and configurations are being tried out. This particular day, I'm at home, sitting on my couch, letting the most recent news settle in my mind and heart. My job has been moved on the chess board, and is about to be taken. "Disestablish" is the word being used. A new job, well a new, old job, different but the same, is to replace it. I'm entitled to apply for the new one, if that is my wish. The singular lack of enthusiasm in the speaking of the Grand Wizard of the Restructuring discourages me. It's not "we hope you'll apply". It's not "we encourage you to apply". It's "you're entitled to apply, if

you want". I'm 49 years old.

Sitting on my couch, I look around the room, at the things I have gathered to form my home (the security that is the result of my having sowed, reaped, gathered), and wonder where I will go if I lose my job. I can't go home to Mum and Dad's place - they're in their 80s. I can't go to the house the bank I own in North East Valley, because other people are living there, and I need their money to keep the bank from seizing the house. I feel totally vulnerable at this moment. I've made my way through life by sowing, reaping, gathering – and that's being taken away.

You'd think, wouldn't you, that I might draw on my previous experience of leaving a job - the time I threw my parish to one side, moved my things into storage, and went off with just a suitcase to live in China. That worked - for a while - an exercise in what you think you need and what you really need. It had actually been quite fun. But at this moment, with my most recent exercise in sowing, reaping and gathering about to collapse, and with no idea what I may need to do next, I'm kind of paralyzed. I'm what you might call "worried".

Coming along out of nowhere, taking the empty place on the couch next to me, comes Jesus. He pats my knee, encourages me to look into his eyes, and says "Don't worry, Matthew. Think of the birds; they neither sow, nor reap, nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?"

I love that he wants to reassure me. I love that he's come here to tell me what he's told me. It almost makes me want to cry - because in vulnerability crying comes easily. But it's just not working. Not at this moment; it's just not working.

Let's leave that scene where it is - some eight years ago. I'm now sitting at my dining room table in Avonhead, Christchurch, writing a sermon for a service at which we'll bless some animals and think some spiritual thoughts in a theme set by a Bible text about an animal. Just now, as I finish the scene of the Dunedin worry, I look out the back window. No carpark in this view, but there is the back end of the house next door. Between us, there's a fence, on top of which is perched a scruffy looking blackbird. He does a pooh, then flies across the tiny garden to the bird bath I've provided for him, has a splash, and now is sitting on the guttering above the window of the third bedroom. The roses are in bloom, and there are bright yellow lemons on the tree. Bees are gathering pollen from the lavender, and the bird seems to be enjoying his post bath sitting in the sun.

The Dunedin situation sorted itself out. I did, because I could if I liked, and I did like, apply for the same but different job; and I got the job. I didn't need to leave the cottage, and dodged that particular immediate crisis. A rather more protracted crisis ensued in the form of a complete lack of affection for the people for whom I worked - and the leeching out of the bottom of my job experience (like there was a hole in the bucket) of anything creative or rewarding in my work. But I had a job until I decided I didn't want it anymore and found a golden opportunity to do something much more enriching. At the beginning of that new, more enriching thing, some people in Christchurch gave praises to the Father in heaven who feeds the birds and clothes the flowers, sang some hymns, and made some promises. And today, as I write a sermon for them, a blackbird sits in the sun (no, to be honest, he's just had a second bath and flown away. He's flying about, rather than sowing, reaping or gathering). And I'm OK.

Millions of people across the planet are not OK. They worry about many things. I've heard a few of them saying they're very much looking forward to 2021 being less complicated than 2020. Who knows whether or not it will be. There will be plenty for us to worry about, and if there's not we'll probably worry anyway, because it's almost in our nature to worry.

Jesus invites us to remember the birds of the air. He tells us that we have tremendous worth, and live beneath the providence of God. Is it working? Will it work? Does the invitation reveal our vulnerability and make us cry? Will it add a single day to the span of our life?

Next time you see a bird, wish it well, give thanks to God, and ponder the invitation of Jesus.

A moment of quiet.