

Sermon Archive 319

Sunday 22 November, 2020

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Matthew 25: 31-46

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



As a fledgling theologian and brand new expert in all things pertaining to God and Jesus, I found myself reacting angrily to a scene from the movie "Jesus Christ Superstar". I hadn't quite yet come to appreciate the value of the thought experiment, the bringing of the imagination to a Christian question. The scene I objected to featured Jesus and some lepers. Jesus was out there, in some dry and barren place of caves, crannies and rocks. Suddenly one of the rocks unfolded itself into a bent and dusty human being. It had been a human being all along, but to first sight it had appeared to be a rock. Now it's a human being singing about its need for healing. Then what appeared to be a dry piece of wood also moved its limbs, well its necrotized stumps anyway. It too sings of its need. Then from the caves and crannies more figures emerge - they too are human beings needing healing. The whole landscape, the physical world, becoming a thing of need, together sings:

*"See my eyes, I can hardly see.
See me stand, I can hardly walk.
I believe you can make me whole.
See my tongue, I can hardly talk.
See my skin, I'm a mass of blood.
See my legs, I can hardly stand.
I believe you can make me well.
See my purse, I'm a poor, poor man.
Will you touch, will you mend me Christ?
Won't you touch, will you heal me Christ?
Will you kiss, you can cure me Christ?
Won't you kiss, won't you pay me Christ?"*

Initially Jesus tries to touch the lepers, to bless them, to respond to them. But they're surrounding him, enveloping him, almost eating him up. Jesus sings

back at them, in fits and starts: "There's too many of you...Don't push me. There's too little of me... Don't crowd me."

As the scene comes to its end, Jesus shouts out "Leave me alone!"

That's the bit I didn't like. I objected to Jesus being presented as someone who wasn't coping well with the needs of the people. Jesus had to be stronger than that. In the face of human suffering and need, Jesus needed to be more God-like - and for "God-like", in those days of my theological pride, you could read "miracle robot made of steel".

Rubbing salt into the wound of my offence was the scene that followed it, where Jesus, worn out, is sleeping, while Mary sings that she doesn't know how to love him. *"He's a man, he's just a man; and I've had so many men before; in very many ways, he's just one more."* Trying to love someone who's just a man, and who's not been coping with the need of the world. Her Jesus wasn't sufficiently machine-like for me. Bullet proof. Titanium. Strong.

Perhaps I had yet to dwell on the wee Christian conviction that Jesus was fully human, and that he did seem to withdraw from time to time to quiet places. Perhaps I had yet to ponder the One whose last few words expressed his being thirsty, the One whom Paul later would describe as having been emptied by others.

These days I'm more inclined to accept that Jesus may have been wearied sometimes by the needs of the people around him. In fact, without a bit of weariness, phrases like "sacrificial life", "God with and for us", "the breaking of the body" don't really make much sense. Jesus must be a figure who is tested and tried - as must be this new expression of him in the world today - his body, the people of his body - responding to need, to the world's need to be healed.

Enough of that! On Monday night (at the end of my usual day off), I had eaten a good meal and was sitting on the couch, watching TV. I can't remember what I was watching, so it can't have been greatly important. There was a knock on my front door. People seldom knock on my door. I don't live right next to a church anymore, so don't get a regular flow of people looking for keys to the hall or instructions on how to use the church

dishwasher. My anonymous house, down a driveway on a back section, doesn't attract any of that kind of parish-related interruption. People who knock on my door tend to be door to door salespeople. And it was my day off, and I was watching TV and full of food - Rick Stein's Spanish Partridge Escabeche with beans. Could I ignore the door? Could I stay on the couch?

I went to the door and found a smallish Eurasian man, nicely dressed, smiling, lanyard around his neck, wanting to talk to me about an electricity company. I told him I was happy with my current power provider, and anyway I was renting, and didn't pay the power bill, and had no control over who my employer chose to buy its power from. That was a lie. I **do** choose my power provider, and I **do** pay for my own power. I just didn't want to talk to him, and wanted him to go away. Which he did. I went back to the couch and the television.

I wonder what he did next. Probably, he knocked on the door of the people next door. I wonder if he dared knock on the door of the house with the sign out the front saying "beware of the dog". I wonder why he does this job, and not something more pleasant than being turned away twenty times each night. I wonder whether maybe his old job disappeared because of Covid, or whether the job that would have suited him better was offered to someone a little more white. Why is he out in the evening, smiling at frowning others, when maybe there's a partner or some children at home who would rather that he was there? He had a lovely smile.

As I wonder these things, I find myself hoping very much that I hadn't been rude to him. Lord, when did we see you? . . .

Well, I don't know if Jesus got tired or not - although he probably did. And I don't know that I've been built, as I dare to see myself as part of Christ's body, to be a machine-like robot of automatic healing. But I do know that people have needs, and that they knock on our doors - sometimes our physical doors, but more often on our metaphorical doors - and that we don't like it.

I know **also** that Jesus reflected on this. And that he speaks of his being, to all intents and purposes invisible, but invisibly present in those moments of people coming face to face.

What are we to do with this, do you think? Matthew who wrote up the thoughts of Jesus, seemed to know what he would do with it. He'd make sure it ended with a clear sifting of people into eternal life or eternal punishment, goats to the left and sheep to the right. Let's use it as a threat to hang over the children of humanity who should have known better. Add a touch of fear to the divine encounter. As Matthew does that, I find myself reminded of the Matthew who, as mentioned earlier in the sermon, hadn't yet learned the value of the thought experiment, the bringing of the imagination to a Christian question. No real discovery, just a heightened fear of getting things wrong and making Jesus angry.

How about we leave that to the Matthews, and explore a different way? Can you imagine what might happen to the world if we dared to believe that the Christ - the One who feeds the hungry, who gives drink to the thirsty, who clothes the naked, who visits the lonely, was in the person sitting next to you? What would the world be like if we opened the door not to someone who wants to sell us power, but who enables us to forgive, to heal, to be compassionate, to be powerless?

I think we would tread the earth differently if we were to see God present in others, even in the naked and hungry others who need us to get up off our couches. I think we'd get up with peace and joy - not out of fear of being treated like a goat for all damnation - but out of our desire to look upon the face of God.

A psalmist once wrote: "One thing I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple . . . 'Come, my heart says, 'seek his face!' Your face, Lord, do I seek." [Psalm 27: 4, 8]

We are not called to be machine-like robots of Christian miracle. We are called seek the face of Christ in others, and to let the joy of finding it transform our world. And that is enough for now.

We keep a moment of quiet.

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