

## Sermon Archive 330

Sunday 14 February, 2021

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Luke 11: 5-13

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



I wonder how many of you have ever tried to effect any change within the public domain - write to an MP, visit a local government office, float an idea for the bettering of the community. Theoretically, within a democracy, we have power to do so.

Well, here's a wee critique of three of my own more recent attempts.

-ooOoo-

Some years ago, when I still watched the Project on TV3, Jesse Mulligan was winding up an article on some recently developed software that allowed computer scanners to capture people's faces and determine, from the shape of the face, whether the person was straight or gay. Jesse said "Wow, a computer that can tell if you're gay. I hope the computer can keep a secret."

I listened to it once, then twice. Had this man just said, on public TV, that being gay was something to be kept secret? As if gayness was something of which to be ashamed? Well, that's how it came across to me, so I thought I'd test it out against the formal broadcasting standards of Aotearoa New Zealand. A regularly broadcast message on public television says "if you think we've broken broadcasting standards, then you can make a formal complaint . . ." Well, here's how I gave it a go.

I looked at the criteria for the breeching of broadcasting standards, and the obvious one was number 6: *"Discrimination and Denigration: Broadcasters should not encourage discrimination against, or denigration of, any section of the community on account of sex, sexual orientation, race, age, disability, occupational status or as a consequence of legitimate expression of religion, culture or political belief."*

As required by the process, I raised the matter first with TV3, who told me that Jesse Mulligan admitted having spoken clumsily. He, however, protested that anyone who **knew** him would know that he wasn't anti-gay. In reply, I made the point that "knowing Jesse Mulligan" was a private matter, while his statement had been a

public one, and many of those listening to him wouldn't be able to decode-to-harmlessness an on-the-face-of-things anti-gay statement. TV3 told me to lighten up.

So, having met a dead-end there, I escalated onto the Broadcasting Standards Authority. The authority told me that Jesse's programme wasn't a serious news programme, but a light entertainment piece, so basically, as TV3 had said, I should learn to take a joke.

I wondered about the numberless clumsy things being said every day that crush the spirit of vulnerable young rainbow people. My name now is on a list of those who have raised unsuccessful complaints through the Broadcasting Standards process. I hope that's not a flag that I'm vexatious - although if it is, probably I can live with that. Am I discouraged?

My second attempt to change the world was when I contacted a Christchurch City councilor and two community board members about getting a green arrow included in the traffic lights down the road. Every time I go to the supermarket, I have to turn right from Maidstone Road into Waimairi Road. Every time I make that turn, I do it on a very orange light. Sometimes I only get that "orange" after four cycles of lights, one car at a time, each one crashing the "orange". Sam (CCC councilor), Shirish and Mike (community board members) agreed to meet me at the intersection one Saturday morning (which was good), and watched, with me, the occasional near-miss and multiple road offences as people turned right on a "red". The three agreed to raise the matter with the road designers. The road designers told them that too few accidents had occurred at that intersection to warrant installing an arrow. I raised a supplementary objection, and Sam said he'd pass it on to someone else, sometime later. Since then: nothing. Am I discouraged?

Third story. On the first day of parliament this year, Rawere Waititi was told that he couldn't speak in the house, since he wasn't wearing a tie. After two Waititi requests to speak, the Speaker instructed Rawere to leave the chamber. I appreciate that he was expelled for repeatedly applying to speak, when the speaker had made a ruling that he could not speak. He wasn't expelled for his clothing. But the whole matter found its starting point in a House insistence that all men (regardless of culture) express respect for the House only in one way - through a piece of fabric worn around the neck. Rawere made the point that pounamu worn around the neck IS a Maori tie, and DOES express respect. But no; by some fundamentalist principle, the only way to express respect in that bi-cultural House, was by a Pakeha tie. Given that no woman in the House is

required to wear a tie, there's nothing magic (universally applicable to all people) about a tie. Yet, one size, it seemed, had to fit all, all sartorial cultures must be one, and other cultures' ways of expressing respect found no place in our parliament - except if they're brought in on Waitangi day to do a haka or sing a waiata - so we can feel good.

I wrote to one member of parliament who is qualified to wear a clerical collar, encouraging him to wear one the following day, to see whether the house objected to that non-fabric tie. I got an automatic email reply from his office, and since: nothing. I watched Parliament TV the next day and saw him in a tie.

I wrote to Knox's local MP, Duncan Webb, who got back to me straight away, pointing out that there were ways of addressing the dress code, other than defying the Speaker in the House. Duncan and I haven't yet had a chance to talk about why that's not really the point - the point being an assumption in a House that should be bi-cultural that there is only to be one way of expressing respect. I want to question the expectation that the native must learn to wear trousers.

I also wrote to the Speaker of the House - sending what I reckoned was a good case. No reply! I was beginning to fall into a pit of cynicism about my impotence in the democratic domain - until . . . fairly soon it was announced that a temporary truce had been called, and the Standing Orders Committee was reviewing the situation. Commentators on Te Reo Irirangi o Aotearoa, Radio New Zealand, spoke of a relaxing of the dress code. IT IS NOT A RELAXATION - POUNAMU EXPRESSES JUST AS MUCH RESPECT AS A TIE. But I let that go.

Having received no reply from the Speaker's Office, I don't know if my communication had anything to do with the shift in position. Maybe it (as part of a wider response from others in the community) **did**; but because I'm so used to being ignored, I easily fall into believing that it **didn't**. I'm used to making my submissions and getting nowhere. Generally, when trying to effect change, am I discouraged?

-ooOoo-

Imagine humanity as one small figure, standing alone on some great existential plain, where the winds blow and the lightning strikes, and the figure's mind is full of fear for its brothers and sisters (brothers and sisters are sick, hungry, poor, oppressed, needing change). So the figure's tried to pull all the levers, and to press all the buttons. It's sent its telegrams, made all its protests, shared all its

good arguments - even **prayed** (for God's sake) - done everything we usually do (and hardly ever do) to make a change . . . But it's like we look for a fish, and get a snake. We look for an egg, and get a scorpion. Generally, are we discouraged?

From the left, to stand by the solitary figure, comes a Christ. Standing next to humanity, Christ says *"Don't stop. You live in the world of a great creative Giver of Life who's longing to energize your intuition about what is right. You live in the world of a body-of-Christ-former, who wants to make you part of a broader, shared, living thing that's full of transforming ability. You form your frustrations, your aspirations, your plans, in a world where the reign of God would usurp the reign of Wrong."*

That's the image we find as Jesus speaks of asking, searching, knocking, for change. In the realm of the world's need and our longing for change, Jesus says:

*Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"*

Well, thank you Jesus! I'll pass that on to myself as I return to ties in parliament, and traffic lights waiting for me to crash. I'll take that to the Broadcasting Standards people, as they tell me to lighten up . . .

But this time, I'll take it a bit less defeatedly. Step away from assuming defeat, I will. Shake off the sense of already having lost, I will. Go with more hope, I will. The holy One who lives within this community of stirring people around me, has a vision for the world. We'll persevere in the right (we'll 'gainst the giant fight!). Are we discouraged?

-ooOoo-

I wonder how many of you have ever tried to effect any change within the public domain. **That** was a wee critique of three of my own attempts.

As this sermon ends, it feels wrong to say "we keep a moment of quiet". It feels better to say "we are not discouraged".

Amene.

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