

Sermon Archive 333

Sunday 7 March, 2021

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: John 2: 13-22

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Driven by a highly-developed sense of right, Jesus storms, past the elbows of well-connected people, into the temple. Finding a whole lot of people there who're greedy and corrupt, and who've less love for the temple and for the people who gather there, than for the money they can make there, he throws the polluters out. Out they go, with their coins, their carcasses, their privilege and position. All out! No one quite understands why he seems able to do this - by what authority?! But he does it anyway, and it's carried along by some great wave of zeal! And there is, within the people, connecting with that zeal, some vestige of understanding that commerce shouldn't be more important than prayer - that "place before God" should be kept for the people. His passion meets in them an intuition for better things for themselves. There should be **room** for the people in the house of God. Jesus has an urgent desire to get rid of the money-changers, so that this can be a house of prayer.

There it is.

Three stories of resistance for the sake of a "peopled-goal" that somehow had been lost along the way. It's a militant Sunday.

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The first of three stories.

When I still was decompressing from having lived in Australia, David Morrison, the head of Australia's Armed Forces went on TV to make the following announcement.

"Earlier today, I addressed the media, and through them the Australian public, about on-going investigations into a group of officers and NCOs whose conduct, if proven, has not only brought the Australian army into disrepute, but has let down every one of you and all of those whose past service has won the respect of our nation . . . Evidence collected to date has identified a group of men within our ranks who have allegedly produced highly inappropriately material demeaning women, and distributed it across the internet and Defense's email networks. If this is true, then the actions of these members are in direct contravention to every value the Australian army stands for . . .

I have stated categorically, many times, that the army has to be an inclusive organization in which every soldier, man and woman, is able to reach their full potential, and is encouraged to do so. Those who think that it is OK to behave in a way that demeans or exploits their colleagues have no place in this army. Our service had been engaged in continuous operation since 1999, and in its longest war ever in Afghanistan. On all operations, female soldiers and officers have proven themselves worthy of the best traditions of the Australian army. They are vital to us maintaining our capability now and into the future. If that does not suit you, then get out. You may find another employer where your attitude and behaviour is acceptable, but I doubt it. The same goes for those who think that toughness is built on humiliating others. Every one of us is responsible for the culture and reputation of our army and the environment in which we work. If you become aware of any individual degrading another, then show moral courage and take a stand against it. No one has ever explained to me how the exploitation or degradation of others enhances capability, or honours the traditions of the Australian army. I will be ruthless in ridding the army of people who cannot live up to its values. . . . If you're not up to it, find something else to do with your life. There is no place for you amongst this band of brothers and sisters."

There we have a person who's worked out what his temple stands for, what's getting in the way, and who needs to step aside. His rhetoric was straight-forward, in-your-face, and quite inspiring. I wonder how the follow-up is going.

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Closer to home, here's the case of Andrew Coster, the Commissioner of Pirihamana Aotearoa, New Zealand Police. With a recent review into the culture of his organization, Andrew has been alerted to a number of instances (perhaps widespread, intransigent instances) of bullying, uninformed management, and aggressive authoritarianism.

Accused recently by an opportunist, fatuous and ridiculous politician, as being a limp-wristed "wokester", incapable of reforming his organization, Andrew said in response to the report:

"I want this to be a workplace where all of our people can thrive, and so we're going to work with all of our leaders to make sure that this can occur; and of course if people aren't prepared to come on that journey, we'll be having a conversation about it."

I wonder what it would be like, having a **conversation** with Andrew - a man of intelligence and principle, about why you're "not on the journey".

David Morrison's line of "just get out" was very direct. I suspect that any conversation held with Andrew Coster, about why you're not already on the journey, would be no less career-endingly direct. I suspect Andrew's more subtle vocab represents an equally steely, reforming, purging, reforming stance,

David says "get out". Andrew says "let's talk about the journey". Both - in the presence of wrong - are clearing the decks.

-ooOoo-

Here's a rather less dramatic, but more local story. I went to the doctor. I sat in the waiting room, and noticed the public health posters on the walls, featuring English language and te reo Maori. I'm enjoying the fact that in this comfortable part of Otautahi / Christchurch biculturalism has some profile.

From a wee room emerges a nurse, who obviously is visiting. Is she filling in for the regular nurse who might be sick at home, or off on a holiday? No idea! But she asks the person at reception "what's with all this Maori stuff?" The conversation ensuing from that question ends up being a seriously disturbing racist diatribe. The one who should have defended the posters sold them for thirty pieces of silver and a horrible conversation.

Not believing my ears, nor knowing what to do with this talking, I went to see the doctor and got some ointment for a rash in my armpit. I then wondered what to do next. On Tuesday of last week, having enrolled myself in another medical practice, I left a letter for the doctor, explaining why I don't want to be a patient there anymore.

The other day my mother asked me if I had had a reply to my letter. I haven't. Actually, I don't really want one. I feel my point has been communicated, and whether or not it hits home, it's been delivered. If I do get a reply, I'll just need to respond to it, and somehow hold my line or justify my position. And part of my natural inclination to be at peace will incline me to say "that's alright", "it's all OK", "No big deal", when none of that is true. It **was** a big deal - just smooth the waters, make all things well - in the face of wrong! Confront the wrong, then high-tail it out of there. Take the table, turn it over, then put it back tidily again. I'd rather not do that.

-ooOoo-

Have you noticed how these examples have been structured? We move from David, who just says "get out", to Andrew, who says "let's have a conversations", which

really means "get out", to Matthew who has the courage to raise a problem, but who then worries about holding the line he's set.

I think we live in world of directness, indirectness, principle, conversations always contained by fear of offending.

We sometimes **are** activated by what we hear, sometimes recoil from responding to what we hear, sometimes have to fashion how we respond to what we hear, sometimes stepping forward, but then back from what we hear. Haven't the money changers worked out a right to be there? Haven't the seller of the doves done due diligence finding a table in the temple. Isn't their presence within the temple (God and people, the people's place) some kind of negotiated compromise?

None of us wants to be an over-reactive pest.

But then, in comes Jesus, turning over the tables and chucking out those who've turned a place of prayer into a den of thieves.

For Jesus, anyway, there's a point in the corruption of things (things being about room for the people to gather) that is beyond the pale - and a trigger in his sense of politeness to let things rip.

I wonder where this leave us.

Secular, public institutions don't hold themselves accountable to Jesus and his intrusion into the temple. So, to our calm, I guess we just need to wish our public institutions well as they try to work out how they're going to operate - how they're going to protect their original purposes in the domain of the rights and needs of the people - the removal of corrupt practices from their house (the police, the military, anyone else). That's a good "Jesus inspiration" to any secular body.

But what for us? - as Jesus bursts in and throws out the money changers from a place that should be for prayer? What of this zealous anger, wanting to reclaim a place for people to pray, to be, to know that they are at home in God? How do we rid the house of the things that are blocking a sense of home and belonging for the people?

Some kind of great reform is needed in our world. Part of it is being conducted in the military. Some is being conducted in the police. Some is happening, haltingly and apologetically in daily negotiations with health authorities. Where else? What else? Where else is Jesus to interrupt the corruption?

A moment of reflection

The Knox Church website is at: <http://www.knoxchurch.co.nz.html> . Sermons are to be found under News / Sermons.