

Sermon Archive 341

Sunday 25 April, 2021

Knox Church, Ōtautahi, Christchurch

Lessons: Acts 4: 5-12

1 John 3: 16-24

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



There are two main parties to this story. I want to describe them both, and then bring them together to see what happens. But first, before that, here's the story of someone who didn't quite make it into the story.

This "not in the story" person is a whole lot more whole-body demonstrative than most of us. Of staunch Kiwi bent, we're more of the Ashley Bloomfield school, who when flush with success, simply allow ourselves a gentle smile. Joy is worn within. But this guy's jumping about - wearing his liberation on his sleeve, in his arms, in his legs and feet - bouncing about like dignity doesn't matter. I don't know - maybe that's what you do with your legs and feet when they've never worked before - exploring the edges of the ways you can express your joy. Don't know . . .

Before today he'd made a crust out of body-shaming his non-working parts (those ankles and legs). He's had his regular place next to the gate; a high pedestrian count, maybe a bend in the road which slows the "walking on by". In his place just enough people see him, respond to him, to make it work financially. It works because people **do** sometimes do have an emotional reaction. Sometimes their hearts move. Other hearts don't at the time, but then catch up later ("I should have responded; I'll respond next time", the heart makes a "note for self". It's the economy of the conscience - the economy of the nagging heart. And that's how it's worked until now . . . on good deeds.

But now, something other than guilt money has found him. Now a different kind of giving has turned a corner - and he's leaping and jumping - jumping right out of that high-viz begging place - leaving it for someone else to take - someone else who's not yet received the deed more generous than money. What just happened there? We'll work it out later - leaping and jumping!

-ooOoo-

Getting on with the part of the sermon that matters, we turn to some people whose names are listed - listed as if they're notable. It's important to list those who are notable. Annas is on the list. Caiaphas is on the list. John and Alexander both are on the list. Interestingly, when I read the list, the first two names made me shudder - they're also on the list of those who leaned on the neck of an innocent prisoner. As for John and Alexander (names presented as if they're famous), history actually has no idea who they are. If they were from the high-priestly family, if they were architects of society, builders of the way things should be, then sacred history certainly hasn't remembered them. We say of John and Alexander not "who **are** they", but "who **were** they?" And every scholarly encyclopedia answers us "not quite sure". John **might** be this person. Alexander might be **that** one, but we just don't know. They're people noted (or feared) in their own short time, who ultimately did nothing to be remembered.

So their names persist on the list of those who in their time had the power to call an enquiry. They, of course, believe their power comes from God - a divine right of their birth into a particular priestly cast. Whether or not it **does** come from God can be argued, but the important thing is that it's acknowledged by the people. When they call an enquiry, the people come - the people obey, the people cooperate. (Goodness knows what the people would do if they lost confidence in the divine right of these builders of society - through a repeated failure of just results. Maybe then they'd need to deploy the national guard.)

Whatever! On this occasion, they call the enquiry, and everyone falls into line. They put questions, and the people will give answers.

Putting their questions, they ask the little people about a deed done the day before. They might have meant to have asked "by what name was the deed done", but they end up asking "by what power or name did you do this?" They pose their question in terms of "power".

Why do we use the words we do? Do the words we choose, especially those chosen on the hoof, reveal something about our deeper concerns. These listed people reveal themselves as being concerned about power being exercised in the community. As they frame their question around power, we get a glimpse into the hearts of the builders of society. On their way from their previous dreadful injustices, on their way to not being remembered, we glimpse their hearts. Their concern is for power.

The second group of people in the story are the Christians. The Christians aren't beyond thinking about power. Like anyone else in any society, they know that power's useful. It's just that they've stumbled across this strange conviction that

real power is achieved not by clinging to power, but by giving power away. Is that nonsense? Confusion? Or something closer to paradox? Not sure! But the greatest power they've seen was in One who laid down his life for others. Power through an act of renunciation. Power through acts of sacrifice. Power not through deeds of hate, but through expressions of love. Having seen this kind of power in Jesus, now the Christians ask the simple question: "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods, and sees and brother or sister in need, and yet refuses help?"

My suspicion is that that question will put the Christians in a tricky place with respect to their own hearts. If they're convinced of the significance of self-giving, then forever they're going to have their hearts questioning them about whether they are giving enough, renouncing enough, sacrificing enough. They may become people who doubt their own service - who feel that their hearts are condemning them. They'd better be careful not to become a people of chronic, overblown, debilitating guilt.

Nevertheless, their question about how the powerful can show love while ignoring the needs of the people, is a good question to put to the people on the list. Maybe the putting of the question will feature in the interaction that is to come. We have the listed people. We have the Christians. Let's bring them together and see what happens!

-ooOoo-

When the two groups come together, the listed people, are the first to speak - of course. They think they're running the show. As well as being the first to speak, they're the first to put their feet firmly in their mouths. They frame their question in terms of power, revealing what their real concern is - holding onto power. No surprise!

The Christians respond by calling the listed "rulers of the people and elders". They also call them "the builders". The Christians are acknowledging the power dynamics holding in the present. And perhaps in doing so, they remind the listed people of their responsibilities. If you're leaders, then "lead". If you're builders, then "build". Don't you be going about rejecting the foundation stone that's needed. Don't be failing to save the people. What are you building? Who, beyond yourselves, are you saving? To what end, all this power and being listed?

The Christians then go on to ponder the reason the enquiry's been called. The listed people have the right to call the enquiry, but why have they done it? What's

been the problem? The problem is that a good deed has been done to someone who was sick. The problem is a good deed.

How's that for perspective? A public meeting has been called, accounts have been demanded, a special judicial assembly is bristling towards sentence and punishment, because a deed was good. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods, and sees a brother or sister in need, and yet refuses help? The question, while not put directly, is certainly asked. There is something about the obviousness of the goodness of the good deed that speaks for itself, and throws a condemnation in the direction of the list.

And the Christians indeed will say "By this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts". There is something in the pure goodness of the deed that reassures the heart. So I hope, when having acted in love, and later they find themselves lying on their beds (last week, pondering on the bed), they don't find themselves being nagged by their hearts. I hope they never have to learn to say "Whenever our hearts condemn us, we turn to God who is greater than our hearts, for God knows everything". I fear there may be an on-going need within the community of the "doers of good deeds" to be reassured that they are doing enough - that 1 John isn't revealing a desperation that comes in salvation by works. That's something for the Christian community still to work out at this time. Meantime, the listed people don't care; the Christians care too much! One who is greater than the human heart needs to give the wisdom.

Anyway . . . that's the interaction at the enquiry.

-ooOoo-

Beyond the enquiry, way over there, beyond the frisson between the uncaring listed people and the conscience über-sensitive Christians, second and third-guessing their hearts, the person who's not quite in this story continues to leap and jump for joy. A deed of goodness has set him free.

Is that ultimately what matters? From the God who gives of self, a deed of goodness has set someone free . . .

We keep a moment of quiet.

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