

Sermon Archive 343

Sunday 9 May, 2021

Knox Church, Ōtautahi, Christchurch

Lesson: John 15: 9-17

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



The legislative wheels of state would never have got into motion in South Africa had millions of South Africans, cheered on by millions of global others not called for change. A great change (what is right; what are we aiming for; what are we no longer prepared to accept) had gone on in the hearts and minds of millions of people. So the government formed a new position, the old texts in the statutes were crossed out, the law commanded society to do things differently now. The will of the heart-and-mind-changed people created new law. The law would not have come into being were it not for the driving force of the will of the people.

Famous for expressing his joy through doing little dances and saying things like "yippee", the Most Reverend Archbishop Desmond Tutu, made an interesting observation. He observed that while the changes in law were important, and much to be celebrated, they, in themselves, were not the job "dusted and done". Constitutionally huge - but not the job dusted and done! Tutu noted that within a system that affords civil rights to all people, it is still possible for one person to hate another. Under the new system, everyone might have a vote, and everyone might be able to use the same toilet; but if, in my heart I still hate you, the job isn't done.

Late in her prime minister-ship, Helen Clark made a parallel observation. Following some significant treaty settlement (probably related to land and money), she was asked when other settlements might be achieved, such that we, as a nation, could move on from the Treaty. She observed that land settlement was important, but that even after all land claims were settled, the Treaty was not something we could put aside - "done and dusted". The treaty was a commitment by two peoples to live together. Once the "money and the land" was sorted, there would still be two peoples who had promised to live together. Just as law in South Africa could not force certain people to love one another, so here in Aotearoa New Zealand, the transfer of land and money between institutions was no final solution. Is the law upheld? Yes? Is the commanded requirement met? Yes? Are

the people, though, longing not to be in relationship? Are they trying to get the business out of the way so they can get on with retreating into their own separate corners and "not being together"? If this is the case, how can we say the job is done? How, indeed, could we conceive of it as a job, when Jesus calls "being together in harmony" a "joy"?

Here's another reflection on structure, constraints and dreams of joy. Andrew Little announced two significant new healthcare developments lately. One was the establishment of a governing body, to be responsible for the delivery of healthcare to Maori. One part of the political constituency has welcomed this with a tender hope it might do something about, amongst other things, the fact that Maori die years earlier than many of the rest of us. This voice of affirmation is hopeful, but only modestly so - as if the speakers of the voice have hoped in vain one too many times before. Another part of the constituency, of course, denounces the new body as "separatist". This is not unexpected - perhaps it is as old as Ōrewa.

A second reaction to the Little reforms has been that towards the dismantling of the District Health Boards. The rationale has been to allocate national resources more evenly, to deal with the so-called postcode lottery for surgery. It's also to cancel out some bits of administration being done twenty times, when one time, centrally, might be enough. It's all about stream-lining! Critics claim that administration is never stream-lined when done by a lumbering behemoth mired somewhere in the Wellington Harbour. Much better, at serving the people on the ground (it is claimed), are **people on the local ground**. People who know, for instance in Invercargill, that Blair Vining's cancer is becoming sick of being patient. People, for instance, who understand that their neighbours in Northland, can't get to the perfectly good health centres, because they don't have cars - all Northland locals know they don't all have cars. Or, for instance, the people in Ōtautahi, where the DHB budget was never going to stretch to ordinary things while also stretching to the reconstruction of quake-damaged buildings and dealing with the fact that Cantabrians are scoring significantly lower than the national average for "mental health, vitality, social functioning and role-emotional subscales". *[Ongoing adverse mental health impact of the earthquake sequence in Christchurch, New Zealand - Janet K Spittlehouse, Peter R Joyce, Esther Vierck, Philip J Schluter, John F Pearson]*

People on the ground are better than centralised bodies, because people on

the ground have local knowledge (what it's like being here and now), and they **care**. Structures can't care. Just as legal structures in South Africa can be good, but can't make you love, just as treaties can sort out the land, but are no substitute for living in respectful relationship, so health structures can't transform experience, unless there is that extra element in play: knowledge and genuine care. And those things - knowledge and care - can't be provided by structures. They can only be provided by living beings who are capable of love.

A colleague, during the week, reflected on how a major restructuring of his parish was going. He noted the ways the new structure was better than the old structure, and how resources were being moved away from backroom machinery into front-of-house action. He was pleased with the structural change. He then professed his belief that no structural change would make any difference, if individual members of the parish didn't allow God to change their hearts, making each one of them a new creation, fallen totally in love with God and neighbour. The place of human knowledge and divine love in growing the fruit that God would grow. I've wondered if he's right. Does it indeed start and finish with the conversion of the individual person?

I speak about all these things because, in our reading today, we have Jesus commanding us to love one another. Is love the kind of thing that can be commanded? I'm pretty sure it can't be **legislated**. It can't be ticked off and left behind. And I'm pretty sure that structural change isn't the same as falling in love. I'm not sure that I, as an individual, am capable, even when I'm commanded, of loving, such that my joy may be complete. (Yippee! I'll do a little dance.) The commanded individual, the "called" community. The law, the obedience. The goal, the reality. The servant, the friend. The ticking of the box and walking away, the completed joy embraced.

The classic response to someone like me, who's wondering about the possibility of a world of friends - of people who love one another - but who wonders whether human beings can do that, is to point to Jesus. He's a human being, seeming to be an individual as I am an individual, hearing the commandment to love, and being able to do it. To the point of laying down one's life for one's friends, he is able to do it.

And my classic response to the classic response is to say "well Jesus and I are

different. There is nothing within me, the way that there was within Jesus, that empowers me to love like that. I don't have divine nature or miraculous power. Indeed, it's true; I don't.

But look at how Jesus is presented in John 15. Jesus says "as the Father has loved me, so I have loved you". Jesus says that he has loved those around him because he himself already has seen love, received love. He's not entering this world of high, impossible tasks, as an isolated individual. He's entering it as one who's already been part of a story of love. He's not **inventing** love, not bringing it forth from some magic empty place within himself. He's drawing on what he already has received - that has met him through another. He has been held in love.

How are we held in love? The lucky ones among us are held in love by the parents who made us and helped us from the start. The lucky ones (who have access to oxygen) are held in love because we live in societies that give us healing when we are sick. The lucky ones are held in love because we feel we belong within a community of grace, where we're accepted not **despite** of who we are, nor actually **because** of who we are, but actually because the love we see in Christ is strong either way. We are people grown within the vine, within the on-going embodied story of the love of God, where people are commanded to love, and know commandment isn't enough, and celebrate that somehow friendship is better than servanthood. And if you want to call that "living within a structure", knock yourself out! But if you believe that structures can't love - only living things can love - well, is God a living thing? Is the body of Christ, the Church, a living thing? Is black and white South Africa a living thing? Is treaty partnership a living thing? Is Knox Ōtautahi a living thing? Is this moment (in which we pause to remember the love of God received and transmitted in a human person) a living thing?

Yippee. Maybe we get to do a little dance - and to keep a moment of quiet.

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