

Sermon Archive 344

Sunday 16 May, 2021

Knox Church, Ōtautahi, Christchurch

Lessons: Acts 1: 15-17, 21-26
John 17: 6-19

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



I can't remember what reasonably formal evening meeting I'd just come from. Nor can I remember why I hadn't done what I normally do in the car on the way home after an evening meeting - that is, getting more comfortable by removing the plastic tab from my clerical collar. I think the event I'm remembering must have happened on a Friday night, because parking was an issue on Riccarton Road and it was really busy. I remember the cold. I remember the shop-window lights, and I remember the noise of people.

I'd parked my car outside the front of the Westfield Mall - near McDonalds, where the buses come in and go out - and I was walking from there to the Joyful Restaurant (a delightfully named Chinese place from which I'd phone ordered some takeaway sweet and sour pork). I cross Riccarton Road; I'm going down the footpath, towards the restaurant. I see, coming up on the left a young man - tall, dark, quite attractive, dressed as those dress when they're out near Division Street to hang out with friends and maybe find some trouble. He's projecting that sort of street-ish confidence. I'm doing the surreptitious "checking out" thing - taking a quick look in his direction while pretending not to be looking. I suspect he sees me looking. I don't **know** that he does, but I know **he** now is seeing **me**. As I walk past him, committed to pretending never to having had looked, quietly (and I say "quietly", though somehow his voice comes clearly through the noise of a Friday night Riccarton Road), he says to me "Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned".

The sin is not his. I feel ashamed.

-ooOoo-

Well the hymn says "Christ is alive, and the universe must celebrate! With a great Alleluia, we praise the power that made the stone roll away!" Well, the sun and the stars are shouting, and the new creation is pulsing; stones are

rolling - and the disciples, before they can join in the dance, are dealing with a vacancy. For they, who used to number twelve, now number only eleven.

Mathematically, it's only a difference of one; and although Jesus once made a big deal over the one hundredth sheep, I'm not sure that applies. It's not like Judas is around anymore to be sought and restored to the fold. It's too late for that. And who says twelve is necessary? Oh, that's right! Someone did once mention that twelve was going to remind people as they heard it of the "twelve tribes of Israel" - a reminder of the original promise - the old one renewed in the new Saviour. Narrative continuity! Like forty days of temptation for him for the forty days of rain in the flood. Clever little coincidences in the story to make it feel more familiar - more naturally a part of the larger story we say is "carrying on". Nothing necessary about twelve, but kind of resonant or thematically useful.

Maybe the biggest problem with eleven is that obvious gap at the table where number twelve used to be. Where there's a gap, there's always a thought back to the past (a furtive look). Where there's an absence, there's the chance of a wee story whispering itself - or if not a story, then at least a pregnant pause. It's better to fill that pause. Otherwise everyone will use it to think what we're insisting we're not thinking: ***what happened to Judas***.

It's interesting, isn't it, that part of "moving on" for the Jesus-people, as we see it in this scene, is Peter declaring publicly that the gap exists. And it's interesting that in doing that, he speaks not generically about a gap, but talks quite directly about Judas - how he was part of the trusted inner circle, but had turned aside from it and "gone to his own place". Peter doesn't avoid talking about Judas, using his name. It's interesting also that Peter seems to need, as he talks about Judas, to come up with an explanation for how Judas ended up doing what he did.

Most of the gospel writers do the same. While not giving Judas an exact motivation, Mark (the earliest writer) says it was all part of God's preordained plan; Judas had little choice but to play the role that history was assigning him. Mark also notes that the priests and elders were looking for a weak link in the Jesus group - so Judas was simply a pawn in their hands - some poor manipulated creature being moved around the board. Matthew says he did it for money - what couldn't you do with thirty pieces of silver! Luke and John say he had the Devil in his heart - whatever that means - does it mean he took furtive looks across the footpath? Historians since have theorized that Judas

was a zealot, and wanted to force Jesus' hand to take up his weapons. Judas was simply someone who was misreading the politics of who and what Jesus was. There are many theories, and who really can pick the best? The interesting thing about the preponderance of theories, is that it shows we're **interested**. It's as if we know we can't move on, into being the risen people, until we've dealt with Judas, until we've come to terms with what went wrong. And it's interesting that a big qualification shared by the two who might take Judas' place is that they've been there from the beginning. They're people who are in a best position for understanding the human realities within which something seriously went wrong for the group. (The importance within the group of those who are in a position to see what went wrong – and to name it.)

Some local notes: - Seeking to move on, one Kiwi church confesses to historical participation in land-grabbing from indigenous people. It happened – it's getting named. Also seeking to move on, another Kiwi Church says "yes, vulnerable people in our care were abused by our leaders". It happened – it's getting named. Also seeking to move on, one particular community within a denomination declares "yes, we have homophobic legislation that excludes perfectly acceptable people from leadership, and we grieve it". It's happening – it's being named. Whether he was greedy, or foolish, or fulfilling a role designed by fate, or whether he had (quote / unquote) a "devil in his heart", Judas is part of every local Christian-community story. And Peter says that naming him, trying to explain what drives him, what empowers him structurally, is part of what the church must do.

Having established this, Peter then calls the people to prayer. Not knowing for sure what was going on for Judas, he says "Lord, you know everyone's heart". Knowing not the heart of Judas, knowing only the damage it's done to other hearts close to it, Peter ascribes to God knowledge of the human heart. Is it indeed a vital part of moving on from Judas, that we pray in ways that call us to take seriously the knowing, the wise assessing of the human heart?

That's the scene from Acts. Looking to the second reading: as **he** explores possibilities in the mind of Jesus, through his great but somewhat rambling prayer of Jesus to the One Jesus calls "Father", the gospel writer John has Jesus praying through the issue of "to whom we belong ". People belong to God, says John's Jesus; and some of them are given to Jesus, so belong to him – or belong to both. "All of mine are yours, and yours are mine". They all live

in the world, but not all of them **belong** to the world. Some belong to the **truth**. I came from you, and some of them know it. I'm not asking things for the world - but for some who live in the world but don't belong to it. All across this part of Jesus' prayer are lines of **belonging** - who do we belong to, who don't we belong to, from whom are we free, to whom do we give our sense of ultimate identity. And in the middle of all this ramble, there's this passing reference to one of the people getting lost (because he was destined to be). Within this great critique of to whom we belong, it's the theorizing again of what went wrong for Judas. Judas is part of the thinking through of who God is and who we are, and how it all fits together. How are we going to move forward? We move forward only once we've done our honest best to fit into the picture the fate of someone we knew - or know - the person of Judas. We see a gap. Who used to be there? What does his absence mean? What are we to do with an absence, other than fill it?

Christ is alive, and the universe must celebrate! With our great Alleluia, how are we to move forward? Does our groaning world need to wait for Pentecost to teach it how to speak? What do we make of our theories of human motivation? Who is this God who knows the heart and who also rolls away the stone?

-ooOoo-

Friday night on Riccarton Road. Lights from the shop windows, and the sound of people doing their thing. Furtive doesn't work. I spy someone, but myself am spied. Sin is quoted, and I feel the shame. To whom do I, in this moment, belong? What is the prayer? "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us [what] you have chosen."

Dealing with Judas, we keep a moment of quiet.