

Sermon Archive 348

Sunday 27 June, 2021

Knox Church, Ōtautahi, Christchurch

Lesson: Psalm 30 Reflections

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Imperceptibly, quietly, we inhabitants of the bottom of the planet just now have tipped past the shortest day. While nights were getting longer and darker, now they're becoming shorter and lighter - imperceptibly. Slowly, now we are heading into a warmth and light we've seen before. Every year it happens, this turning towards a new time - we're children in time.

And this time I do the turning having just moved into what I hope will be the last house in which I will live. It's been a life of many houses - each one of which I could use as something of a book end - a marker, a chapter - a slice of life, or a part of the gift of life. The gift of life. I do my turning from our shortest day, into a new day, at a time where I'm inclined to be thinking about chapters and constants in the gift of life. Chapters and constants in the gift of life.

-ooOoo-

The first chapter was childhood and adolescence. Without trying at all, although apparently my parents had to try twice (the first attempt at my conception resulted in nothing), I arrived in life. The result of other people's love and their desire to share their life with another living being whom they created, life was given to me. Simply a gift.

I lived in a house that also was a gift. I did nothing other than innocently to occupy it, treat it as my completely natural place to be, while Dad, then Mum and Dad went to work to pay for it. They were both good at their jobs, and most of the time enjoyed it - although I think mid-career, that Dad went through an extended time of struggling to enjoy work. Was that a stage of life? A season? Something between the chaptering book ends? Although we did talk about it a bit, I'm just not sure.

I have memories, from childhood, of being sick, not seriously. I remember sitting on our posh couch, in the sitting room, with sunlight outside, wrapped up in a

blanket - and eating a peanut butter sandwich made by my mother, with crusts cut off, since I didn't like crusts and Mum's care for a sick boy included taking notice of such dislikes. The worst thing I remember doing was stealing an orange lolly from the Big S supermarket in Picton Street. It was so delightfully orange, and needed to be eaten. I put it in my pocket and wasn't caught. "One nil" to the Tempter - and something to be kept in my collection of guilt. I'm not aware of any good deeds I did as a child. But perhaps simply by being silly and innocent and occasionally being refreshingly naive (to the delight of my parents), some of my life could probably get a "good deed" tick.

Then, in adolescence, I became clever and arrogant. I fell in love, and nobody understood me. I fell out of love, and the world came to an end. And I carried on living in a house I didn't pay for, but was provided to me out of love. That's a chapter. Put the book end there.

-ooOoo-

On the verge of adulthood, I heard a strange story about a person coming from God, living an adventurous life of love for the world, being killed, then coming again to life. He came to life again not because he was a double-life person (special DNA), but because God, from beyond, loved too much, and gave more life. The risen One was a person of gracious gift - the story is about a gift.

Invaded, unbalanced, by the story of Jesus, I left home and went to a little city down South - a place called Dunedin. Perhaps home sickness contributed, or maybe it was just me becoming my adult self, but in Dunedin I experienced my first bout of depression. No one made me a peanut butter sandwich, but someone would have done if they'd known it was required; good people **were** present. One of the constants seems to be good people - even when they're just being themselves, rather than doing good deeds. (Sing praises to the Lord, O you faithful ones, and give thanks to the holy name.)

During this time, I was a bad friend to a woman called Ann. I was cruel and selfish to a woman called Dawn. (I said in my prosperity, "I shall never be moved".) I did four and a half good deeds each week. That's a chapter. Put the book end there.

-ooOoo-

Equipped with a qualification in ministry, I embarked on serving in two Auckland parishes. I'd done Old and New Testament, Systematic Theology,

Church History, Practical Theology and a few other things. I was qualified. On the diploma that entitled me to get on with it, my name was written slightly crookedly - not on the parallel - like the calligrapher might have been "tired and emotional". This was a time when I *knew*, with irenic confidence to the forgiving, what life was for, and I was getting on with it - pulling others along in the wake. "By your favour, O Lord, you had established me as a strong mountain." I think I may not have damaged too many people during this chapter, although I did damage some. Some forgave me, and others didn't. Again, there were good people around - and the story of the dying / living One continued to speak. Having started my enduring practice of telling my church council each month what I was spending my time doing, I was more inclined during this time to keep count of good deeds. Under council scrutiny, my good deeds rate rose to seven. Seven good deeds each measurement unit. (Is the measurement unit a day, a week, a month? Does it matter? I was quite righteous.) That's a chapter. Put the book end there.

-ooOoo-

The next chapter is overseas, in a place called Sydney. In Sydney a major reconstruction of self ensued. And you can't reconstruct until you've deconstructed. Trust me, deconstruction of the person is just plain hard. "O Lord my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me" . . . Before the healing, and the re-embracing of the gift of life, I did one or two good deeds, but my heart wasn't in it. I identified most closely with the dying / rising One in his dying. Rising was indeed still part of the weird story hung above my given life, but it was mystery - not initially for me to claim. ("What profit is there in my defeat, if I go down to the Pit? Will the dust praise you?" I just don't know.) I was not to know, during this chapter, that weeping may linger for the night, but that joy comes with the morning. When *will* that morning be? Imperceptibly, have we just passed a shortest day? Why this need just now to review my life in the light of a psalm that sings its song? The song that sings "I will extol you, O Lord, for you have drawn me up". That's a chapter. Put the book end there.

-ooOoo-

Beyond that book end, I came to Ōtautahi. I came to explore, within a particular community, what it continues to mean to follow the One who dies

and then is raised to life that is new. This story has been a constant background voice in my adult life. Given life once. Given life again - as if life is the point.

I'm not quite sure at what point we moved from "rejoicing in life" being the point. When did we move to worrying about how many good deeds we've done - rather than rejoice in the gift we've been given - as if a number somehow makes a difference? The psalmist rejoices that the whole of life is somehow an exercise in the healing presence of God. The Christian rejoices that the whole of life is given by One who is graciously present in sickness and the Pit, and in singing and dancing. The Christian rejoices that each chapter is a re-writing of the story of life twice-given. The gift of life. Life as a gift to be embraced, celebrated, wept, danced, cried, smiled, questioned, pleaded. The soul must not be silent, but must give thanks forever.

-ooOoo-

Well, that may have been the most self-indulgent reverie on personal history that's ever masqueraded as a sermon. It's been all about me. But ***you also*** have received the gift of life, and that gift has no doubt fallen into chapters with themes and constants, with fallings into the pit and gracious being raised up high. You too live under the arc of the story of the One who was given the gift of life, and then was given life again. Embrace life. Clasp it. Give it away. Forgive. Be forgiven. Do a good work at a rate of seven per unit if you must - but may we never forget to love life - and firstly to follow the twice living Lord!

We who imperceptibly, quietly just have turned the corner into longer days and shorter nights, may our souls praise God and not be silent. Sing praises to the Lord, through your lives, O you faithful ones, and give thanks to the holy name.

We keep a moment of quiet.