

Sermon Archive 351

Sunday 18 July, 2021

Knox Church, Ōtautahi, Christchurch

Lessons: Psalm 23

Mark 6: 30-34, 53-56

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



During Level Four lockdown last year, while I was still living in Avonhead, my local supermarket, to which I needed to go for food and toilet paper (DON'T FORGET THE TOILET PAPER), was the Ilam New World. The shop keepers there ran their operation in a really socially responsible way. They took on extra staff to patrol the long line of people formed through the car park, making sure not only that people were keeping a good two metres between them and the person in front, but also making sure that peace was being kept. The car park monitors seemed to me to have been chosen for their capacity to communicate the distancing requirements, but also to jolly people along to avoid the disorder that comes when people become frustrated. In some ways, with this kind of good-humoured support in the car park, waiting to get into the supermarket was the easy bit. The hard bit was once I was inside. Inside the supermarket, with the aisles being only of a regular width, if people stood in the middle of the aisle, I couldn't get around them while keeping two metres away. You kind of relied on people to know that, and to make sure they didn't spend ages standing right in the middle, scanning the shelves for products they wanted but were actually in the next aisle down.

Waiting, waiting . . . waiting. Tempted, I was, on more than one occasion to cry out "move over, hurry up". I didn't, of course, but I was tempted. There's something extremely irritating about seeing the product you want, right in front of the dithering person who's getting in the way. The person becomes a physical object, blocking me from what I want. And not voicing my irritation, but curating it within, I was amazed at how powerful my annoyance became. I developed many great judgments - ideas about how

this person (whom I did not know) could ever have become the most irritating person in the world.

I would *like to say* that this was a function of the stress of lockdown. We were all anxious, and none of us knew whether lockdown was working. We were all without our usual way of life, and somewhat removed from the usual social interactions that kept us positive. Lockdown was bound to make us cranky, so let's blame Covid. Except . . . that now I've moved from Avonhead, I have a new local supermarket. This one isn't in lockdown, but its aisles are narrower than the ones in Ilam. And pressed for space in the fruit and vegetable aisles especially, they've got large storage units positioned in the middle of the aisle. And, within the narrowed space, frequently I find myself seeing the yams, or the leeks, or the onions, but not being able to get them because there's this dithering person in the way - spending ages deciding whether to buy this yam or that yam, or sometimes infuriatingly no yam in the end - before wandering off in slow motion to some other inconvenient place. Even without the stress of lockdown, I still frequently find myself seeing people in front of me as objects in the way. Who are they? Why are there so many of them? Why won't they hurry up or go away?

Eventually, with my shopping done, I take my groceries home, and cook a meal for one. Generally, the food is nice - I agree with myself that it is.

I wonder if you enjoyed that story. I can tell you that it's a true one. You've heard the true confession of the grumpiest man in Ōtautahi. May I suggest to you, though, that I wrote it not so much as a confession, as much as an allegory - a word picture about a human being among other human beings, seeing them not as people, but as problems, as objects in the way. And while it's probably a universally human condition, I wonder whether there mightn't be various thought patterns that make it a particularly Western condition. Because in the West we're oriented by this thing called "capitalism" - where if we've got money, we have an expectation we'll get what we want. Capitalism - where the model casts other people as competitors for limited resources - ("it's the economy stupid"). We've also got this thing called "individualism" - an understanding that we don't really belong to one another, but exist first

and foremost for and by ourselves. There are probably several other Western "isms" that fortify our thinking along these lines, along with this wonderful Eastern story of our origins - in which the human being sees the apple, wants the apple, takes the apple, without regard to what's been said by anyone else in the garden. The point is we often reduce other people to the status of "objects that are in our way".

People are getting in Jesus' way. I don't know whether **he** just wants a break from people, or whether he intuites that his disciples, who've been busy lately, need a break. But whether it's for his own sake or for the sake of those close to him, he knows they all need to get themselves to a quiet place - a place he describes as somewhere where they can rest. I also don't know whether it's a place that comes to **his** mind, or whether he's said to Peter, for instance, "we really need a quiet place, Peter. Can you think of one?" Whatever the case, by the time they get to the quiet place, the people have beaten them there. It's full of people. Who are they? Why are there so many of them? Why won't they hurry up or go away? The **physical** space is full of **physical** objects getting in the way of what Jesus wants or needs - so the **social** space is full of **problems** - competitors for the precious resource of time, impediments to his need for quiet. Strangers slipping into being objects - getting in the way.

We are not workers of miracles. **We're** not people who divide history in two with our teaching. We're not, in short, the Christ. But maybe we can learn something from the teacher. Let by the gospel-writer, Mark, into the thinking of Jesus for a while, we learn something about the teacher's understanding of the people he probably hoped wouldn't be there. He sees them, first, most immediately, as sheep looking for a shepherd. What's a shepherd? Someone wrote a lovely psalm about it, but first and foremost, the shepherd is someone who keeps safe the creatures who are vulnerable. When Jesus looks upon the people who've gathered around him, he sees the vulnerable. The ones cluttering up our aisles and getting in the way of what we planned are the vulnerable.

That's not really terribly remarkable. Of course that's who they are. But

there are times when we forget it - especially when it comes to the stranger. We don't know the stranger - we know nothing of the ways in which they are vulnerable (and therefore vulnerably human). But being vulnerably human is what becomes obvious to the One whom we are told sees them with compassion. That's why there and then he teaches them many things.

But that teaching them, there and then, is just part of the story of the people getting in the way. He moves on from the non-quiet place to other places, also full of people (villages, cities, farms). And as he moves around these other places, this is what more we learn about who they are. Who are they? They are people who bring to him those who are sick. They are people who carry around with them, in their thinking, in their feeling, even physically, the sick others who are important to them. We are told that they **begged** Jesus to let them touch even the hem of his cloak. I see this act of bringing others, and this begging on their behalf, as a deed of love. Who are these people who clutter up the place? They are those who love others.

So, who is that irritating person in front of me in the supermarket aisle? Could she be someone who loves another human being? Is she someone who'd be willing to carry one she loves so he can touch something that will heal or restore his soul? I don't know; but the teacher who sees with compassion is teaching us many things.

As I said, we are not Christ. I don't think it's helpful for me to hear sermons that require me to be the Christ. But maybe the teacher would like to teach me something. Maybe the shepherd would like to lead me beside some still water, enable me to become part of goodness and mercy. He had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.

In search of our shepherd, we keep a moment of quiet.