

Sermon Archive 354

Sunday 8 August, 2021

Knox Church, Ōtautahi, Christchurch

Lesson: Isaiah 11: 1-9

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



It sort of looks like the world we're used to - full of the same of old cast of same old characters: the lions with their big teeth and sharpest claws; the snakes with their forked tongues and fangs full of poison; the bears whose paws are perfectly designed for sifting through the rubbish bins in the winter; the leopard with its never-changing spots - the spots never change you know! None of these characters is unknown to us; our world is full of them. So when we look upon Isaiah's scene, it feels quite like our world.

But quite unlike our world as well. For our familiar old cast of characters is "out of character". While still possessing all the design features that make them perfect at competition and violence, they're not using any of them. They've hung their trumpets in the hall. They're practising war no more. They neither hurt nor destroy in any part of the world. To our same old cast of characters, whom we could well call our "list of usual suspects", peace has come. And for this, everyone is blaming the child who leads them. He leads them by being able to look beyond appearances (seeing the world perceptively). He leads by understanding the world - operating as if by a spirit of counsel and wisdom. He leads by having a deep concern for the meek - (quiet ones who never shout in their own interests - maybe sometimes because they're afraid - yes, he cares for those who are afraid. In the olden days we saw other people's fear as a strategic opportunity. But he's leading his world to peace by caring for those who are afraid.). The familiar old world, with its familiar old characters finds peace, because he is leading the world in this wise, re-creating way. This tender green shoot, growing out of the charred stump of the fire-stormed past, is bringing peace to the world. Do you remember a text from a sermon last week? "The true bread of God is coming down from heaven, bringing life to the world". In similar vein, here the green tender shoot is growing, and changing the world with its wisdom, its caring, and its vision.

On a Peace Sunday, I want to see where in our world the shoot is growing. Yes, I want to call into dis-honourable mention those who are trampling on the shoot,

who are yanking it out of the ground. But I certainly want to give thanks for those whose approach to the world is part of the growing green of peace.

And so, our brick bats and bouquets for our current cohort of same old characters.

-ooOoo-

We cannot talk about our world at the moment, without addressing Covid. Four short stories about Covid. The first story is set in Myanmar. In Myanmar, the virus is spreading rapidly through the rural areas, where the people generally are poor and there is next to no medical infrastructure. Trying to take help to where it is needed, the doctors and nurses of Myanmar are travelling into exposed, isolated areas. In these exposed and isolated areas they are being intercepted by agents of the military government, who are arresting them and taking them back into the cities where they're being imprisoned. They're being imprisoned during a time of pronounced and urgent need, because some time ago a senior spokesperson for the medical community made a public statement that was critical of the government. The poor of Myanmar are dying because their government didn't like something said by someone else. With righteousness he shall judge the poor and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.

Second story: Dr Apisalome Talemaitoga, known either affectionately or lazily as Dr Api, speaks to media occasionally about the particular vulnerability to Covid of the Pasifika community. Such are the crowded housing conditions, the economic conditions, the pre-existing health conditions of the Pasifika community, along with the complication of English being the government's main language of Covid communication, that were Covid ever to get a toe hold in Pacific neighbourhoods, the result would be very bad. So Dr Api spends time working with Pacific Island leaders, church ministers, community workers, to make Covid things easier. He quietly de-bunks conspiracy theories; he enables connections with support services; he works with real sensitivity and wisdom from within a culture. He judges for the meek of the earth. Faithfulness is the belt around his loins. Bulla Vinaka Dr Apisalome Talemaitoga. You get a Knox Church Peace bouquet.

Third Covid story: in what the protestors called "a worldwide rally for freedom", but what New South Wales Premier, Gladys Berejiklian, called "utterly disgusting", thousands of Sydneysiders took off their masks, broke their

lockdown, and assembled in their thousands on Sydney's Broadway. "It's our right to be here" they said, while one of them punched a horse in its face. As the horse bit back, Matthew Jack, watching on his TV felt a little spark of pleasure. They will neither hurt nor destroy on all God's holy mountain, indeed; but I was thinking "good on the horse". Does our sense of justice, our desire to "kill the wicked with the breath of our lips" sometimes get tangled up in our commitment to peace? I'm not sure, but not seeming to care very much for the medically vulnerable in their community, the Sydney protestors get no Peace Sunday bouquet. (Editorial insertion here: in a reflective moment after having written the Sydney protest section of the sermon, the preacher wondered why the protestors did what they did. Did they perhaps do it because they're scared? Or did they do it because they knew other people were scared, and we like to use other people's fear as a strategic opportunity? Someone with greater understanding and wisdom than me needs to work that one out. Maybe we need the child to lead us.)

Fourth Covid story: also an Australian story. Prime minister Scott Morrison announced in March that once the vaccine production plant in Melbourne got up and running to full capacity, free supplies of AstraZeneca doses would be sent to Papua New Guinea and Timor Leste - economically challenged neighbours of Australia, facing major outbreaks. The wolf shall live with the lamb; the cow and the bear shall graze together. As neighbours share what they need with one another, is the little child leading them? Is the green shoot growing out of the burnt old stump? A bouquet is given in celebration of peace.

That'll do for Covid. (So says the preacher, as if Covid can now be left behind!)

A police story from home. Following the trial of Eli Epiha for the murder of Constable Matthew Hunt and the attempted murder of David Goldfinch, people started thinking again about whether it now was time to adopt the routine arming of frontline police officers. Poto Williams, the Police minister does not favour it. On National Radio's Panel programme, Garry McCormick invoked the spirit of "nothing about me, without me". In every case where a decision needs to be made, it ought only to be made once the vulnerable have spoken. His view was that in this case, the "vulnerable" are the people who are getting guns pointed at them - the frontline police officers. Garry was of the view that the decision ought to be theirs. And it was reported just this week, as Chris Cahill spoke for the New Zealand Police Association, that the frontline police officers

do favour the regular wearing of firearms. We, of course, know that in some countries armed police officers make things worse, rather than better. We know that more firearms in human hands seldom have secured peace in the community. Sitting in front of my TV, warmed by my heat-pump, I have thought about these things. I have spare bouquets and brick bats at hand. Which one do I go for? To whom do I present it? If a little child were to be leading us to peace, I wonder what the child would ask us to do.

That's about all the room we have for now for stories about a world seeking peace. Although it might be the nuclear free moment for this generation, we haven't had time to think about global warming - and the challenges it raises for peaceful enjoyment of the world. We haven't had time, even though the child decides with equity for the poor, to think about debt cancellation for poorer countries. There used to be a lot of talk about that, but it seems to have gone quiet lately. We haven't had time to think about how the government of Belarus managed to divert a Ryan Air plane in and take Roman Protasevich into custody. We haven't talked about the very public resignation of one-time Boris Johnson lauded Nurse Jenny - and whether her bouquet should be for nursing or for protesting. We haven't touched on where the brick bats and bouquets fall as a United States and New Zealand withdrawal from Afghanistan exposes those who have worked with the foreign peacekeepers to Taliban retribution. What now of their vulnerability? The nature of the world, and the fact that our same old characters still do have fangs and claws and hunger needing to be satisfied, means we're never going to fit it all into a sermon. Yet the little child of Isaiah's hopeful vision is wanting to lead us.

The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might. The poor and the meek are included. Hurting and destroying are to be brought to an end. A green shoot silently is growing from the fire-stormed stump.

Waiting for the child to lead us, we keep a moment of quiet.