

Sermon Archive 358

Sunday 5 September, 2021

Knox Church, Ōtautahi, Christchurch

Reading: Mark 7: 24-30

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



The New Zealand-made television series "National Treasures" is based at the War Memorial Museum in Tamaki Makaurau Auckland, and features a group of interviewers talking to people about various objects that have national significance. In one episode, Oscar Kightley, a warm, funny man who was born in Samoa but has lived in Aotearoa since he was four years old. Oscar is talking to a caucasian man, Welby Ings, about some pieces of wood. The pieces came from his woodwork room, from a time when he was a woodwork teacher at Seddon High School - which now is called Western Springs College (so around Grey Lynn and Ponsonby). Welby's main teaching focus was with fifteen year olds who were studying for what then was called School Certificate. This was in the late 1970s, early 80s.

The pieces of wood are quite unremarkable - bearing the odd bit of graffiti. Nothing particularly vulgar, profound, political. The first bit of graffiti to fall into the view of the camera simply says "Sam Afitu was hiding in here on the 11.8.80".

Welby explains that the piece of wood was from the lining of a cavity under a trap door down the back of his classroom workshop. By August of 1980, following a number of years of government driven, public-popular dawn raids on Pasifika homes, Immigration New Zealand had begun raiding secondary schools as well. Seddon High School was full of young Pacific Islanders - so had begun to be visited often by Immigration officials.

Two women in the front office of the school would be the first to see the officials arrive, so would ring various classrooms around the school. Ring three times, stop. Ring once, stop. That was the signal for the teachers that the government was coming. In Welby's workshop, he then would take his young Pasifika people, put them down the trapdoor and make himself look busy teaching the non-Pasifika fifteen year olds. "Sam Afitu was hiding in here on the 11.8.80".

Oscar says to Welby "it wasn't that long ago. To think that this happened in New Zealand - where teachers were having to hide their students under trapdoors to hide from Immigration - what made you teachers do this?" Welby replies: "love; people think that teachers teach reading, writing, arithmetic. You don't; you try to grow someone; and sometimes there is something higher than law - it's justice - and you get caught in the conflict, and that's what happened here."

Oscar later reflects on the pieces of wood. He says "you know, when I first saw this, I got really upset - because it's horrible. But, actually, it's also a reminder of the resistance to that." Co-host, Stacey Morrison, says to Oscar "how are you feeling, cause I saw you struggling a bit, eh. Do you remember feeling scared yourself?"

Oscar says: "ah, you know, cause we lived out West; our family left our Ponsonby house; so I just remember hearing lots of stories of relatives coming and, you know, disappearing; and the dawn raids was something you always heard about in whispers. It was only later, as an adult, and I became a writer, and I thought I'm going to write a play about this; and the research was just horrible".

Stacey gives Oscar a hug.

Some years earlier, Oscar featured in another TV programme - this one called "Intrepid Journeys", where well known New Zealanders visited slightly "out the way" destinations. Oscar was visiting what then was called Burma / Myanmar. Exploring a bustling food market in a mountainous region, he finds himself being shadowed by a little boy - who has sparkling eyes, a wonderful smile and some very rudimentary English. Their conversation, therefore, is fairly simple, and sometimes gets confused. Oscar asks the boy whether he is hungry, but it seems the boy thinks that Oscar is saying that **he** is hungry. So the boy takes him back to his little stall, where some food is being kept warm in a pot. The stall is made of bamboo and hessian cloth, the table has kitchen things on it - plastic, metal, one of those old enamel jugs - it's got very much a second-hand feel to it.

Oscar says: "He's going to wipe the stool, so I can sit down. How old are you? Ten! Wow, he's ten years old and he's manning his own stall in the market. Take this guy back to New Zealand, and he's so obviously got initiative, that

he could probably do about anything. Thank you for showing me around. Well, good luck.

Later, Oscar says: "You know, little encounters like that, that I've been having here in Myanmar, those are the . . . I had a bet with a mate, twenty bucks, that I wouldn't cry. That little kid's store, he didn't have anything, really. Little brown kids really hold a special place in my heart, because even though I was lucky that I got to come to New Zealand, which is a land of opportunity, I still feel like a little brown kid from the village sometimes. But I hope that little kid does well today."

-ooOoo-

To a Bible reading . . .

Someone came to him, to ask him a favour for her daughter. And he said, "nah; the blessing's not for you. You're not of our people; you've no place at our table." **Our** table!

Human beings are very good at focussing on differences that make it easier to turn people away - to turn away the little brown kid who comes from somewhere else. Even Jesus does it, and it makes Oscar cry. Perhaps it should make us cry as well.

It makes the mother of the little brown kid in question do more than cry. It makes her push Jesus to think about the table, and whether there might be another way of thinking, more broadly, less tiredly, about how to fit more people around it for the feast of God's wholeness. She kind of insists that Jesus think about it, if only think. And, of course, as soon as he begins to think, an attitude changes, a healing occurs and the child is made well.

People have spent a bit of time thinking about how Jesus could have been so closed to the woman's request for a healing for her daughter. Much of the thinking has been about finding a way to defend the honour of Jesus. He was being ironic. He was prompting the woman to double-down on her faith. He was doing all manner of other thing.

I actually reckon that he was just tired and mis-firing. Stretched to his limit and needing to narrow down the demand. I mean, how often have we heard

in our readings recently that he's been seeking a quiet place away from the crowd. You'd think he could find that now he's travelled well beyond his own world to this godless Gentile place full of little brown kids. But no; even far from where he's expected to be known, the people keep coming. I think there's something in his reaction that's probably not entirely racist - just frightened and tired. Is God allowed to be frightened and tired? We'll need to find an expert and ask them. But for the moment it's just Jesus in his culture and world of little brown kids (in the bamboo hessian stall, under the trap door in Western Springs) needing some freedom and welcome - needing not to be considered over-stayers, outcasts and dogs.

The important thing in this story, I think, is that when the tired human being is provoked, and God awakens in his thinking, is that the table opens up, crumbs are distributed, and the little brown kid is healed.

What do you think? Does that make sense?

If it does make sense, then our task may be to stir up the "God in us" as we have our talks about who deserves a place at the table, and talks about who belongs, and talks about why some people are not our responsibility.

Oscar hears about people like him, who had to be hidden - so they wouldn't be cast out from the society that formed them. Oscar meets a wee boy who has nothing, but wipes down the stool, so that Oscar can sit. Oscar remembers stories about relatives in Ponsonby who suddenly disappeared. Oscar cries about it all.

And a mother, when dismissed by a tired Jesus, insists that "the God in Jesus" wake up, rise up, and heal the world.

And **that** God does.

A moment of quiet.