

Sermon Archive 360

Sunday 7 November, 2021

Knox Church, Ōtautahi, Christchurch

Reading: 1 Kings 17: 8-24

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Here are a few quotes from the Television New Zealand 6:00pm news last Monday. It's a bit of commentary and reaction to the cabinet's decision that day to move towards relaxing some of the Covid restrictions in Tamaki Makaurau Auckland.

The commentator said "I understand, behind the scenes, the prime minister was very keen to give Aucklanders more freedoms this week, but the health advice was that it was not safe to do that yet; so they arrived at this middle ground where they gave Aucklanders a date for next week".

Testing the idea that there had been some quite new departing from basing decisions solely on health criteria, to something more politically oriented, a journalist asked the Prime minister "our case numbers are still really high; how much of this is about political pressure? Do you hear those loud cries from Auckland that they've had enough?"

The Prime minister replied: "we have recently made changes to schooling, that enables us just to let those changes bed in, let those extra vaccinations occur, and then safely move to that next stage."

Seeking further enlightenment, about whether the decision was a good one, the journalist interviewed Professor Rod Jackson, an epidemiologist at the University of Auckland. She asked whether, after eleven weeks of restrictions, Auckland is ready for a relaxation. The professor replied: "I didn't think we were. It is such a balancing act. I'm glad I'm not the prime minister. It's balancing the cost of jobs, sadly, against the cost of life. We still have half a million New Zealanders who are eligible for vaccination who aren't vaccinated."

Out on the streets of Auckland, an interviewer found an exasperated man, who with some animation, said "I want to go to a cafe. I want to be able to go in there, sit down and enjoy a cup of coffee, and have a bit of cake."

His voice expresses what experts call "Covid fatigue" - a longing for things to be simple and ordinary again. It's a fatigue that I think is growing, moving to a new stage. And I think it's unsettling the government, which until now has been determined to be guided singly by science. (I don't know; maybe I need to remember that psychology is a science too!) It just feels to me as if it's all a bit fragile and delicate at the moment. It feels like this could be a time where new wisdom, new sharing of life, new providing for one another is required.

The news item ended with the correspondent saying: "Look, Aucklanders have been told to suck it up week after week, and politically the P.M. needed to give them something to aim for today."

New wisdom, new sharing of life, new providing for one another . . .

-ooOoo-

Well, in the background, as a back story to the drought that was testing the people of Israel, we had a series of immoral and incompetent kings on the throne. They did the most obtuse, undignified things - things that would make one blush, were one to have a healthy sense of shame. I don't know that you can blame a drought on bad behaviour (or maybe Glasgow acknowledges that you *can*), but whatever! Those who ponder such matters will note in the backstory an offended God who decides no longer to send rain upon the earth. And the drought, the restriction, the lack of normal life (eating and drinking - I just want some coffee and a piece of cake) sets in hard. When Elijah, a man with a strong sense of the will of God, came to Zarephath, he found a local woman out and about, looking for firewood. Her looking for firewood is interestingly described. It's described as "gathering a couple of sticks" - I'm gathering a couple of sticks. I don't know; it just feels to me as if it's all a bit fragile and delicate.

Indeed, she's feeling delicate. When Elijah turns up, he doesn't seem to her to be an interesting visitor, an opportunity for community or contemplation. He seems simply, to her, to be just another mouth to feed. And, in her delicacy, that extra mouth causes her to shout "I have nothing baked, only a hand full of meal in a jar; I'm now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, then die".

The five thousand people whom Jesus fed never gave the sense that their situation was desperate. If Jesus hadn't fed them, they'd have been OK. But this is a scene of serious deprivation. A deprivation that, when pricked, gushes forth

a tirade of genuine fear and anger. Here's the bloody church, turning up with its almost offensive assumption that everything is OK, while in reality, everything is dying. She might say "I just want to go to a table; I just want to be able to eat some cake. But the world's not working like that. I am having to eat only anger and fear. And now God's turned up, in the form of someone who seems to think I've got a duty to feed him."

Elijah's word to her is "don't be frightened". He also tells her that God will provide; and it seems that God does. Not by ending the drought, which would have been good. Not by providing a feast of coffee and cake. But by making sure - for a while anyway - that the meagre provisions are enough. We're told that she, and he, and her house, ate for "many days". But, please God, why doesn't it rain?

After the many days they initially didn't think they would have, the provision seems to have not been enough to sustain life and health for the long-term. Small mercies seem not to have been enough for a long haul. As they sometimes do when weakened by protracted droughts and famines, people become fragile - not robust, but delicate. The woman's son falls ill, and nothing is helping him. Reminding Elijah that he's a "man of God", a flesh and blood (and food-consuming) embodiment of God's care for the house, she rails against him. "What have you against me, you man of God?" She's angry.

Moving from the anger of the living room, where he can be seen, where maybe his public persona is all confidence and claptrap, Elijah takes the boy into one of the bedrooms. And in that space where he doesn't need to be the public person, it's as if he breaks down. He's described as "crying out". "O Lord my God, why? Why have you brought calamity even upon this widow with whom I'm staying - killing her son!" Elijah becomes one with the anger and the fear. He becomes one with the suffering of the house. In a moment, shall we say "in the twinkling of an eye or the blasting of a trumpet", he's changed. He ceases to be the impassive, slightly unreal person who's owed a living by the house. He becomes someone who, from the inside, now cares deeply for this little family. Has he, over the declared "many days", come to love them, to care? Who knows? But the status-bearing visitor who was putting strain on the pantry, blessing them only with meagre life, becomes someone who's passionate for them. Yes, in the shift he loses some of his prophetic dignity. He shows that his outward confidence was kind of flimsy (shall we say fragile, delicate) - made of painted

cardboard (stone colours and patterns on papier maché). In his place is this person who now cares, who doesn't want the death of a child to be on his hands. (I ate the cake, while the boy got weaker. I stretched the resources his mother would have given to him. About all this, I deeply care.)

What did we say at the start of the sermon? A time for new wisdom, new sharing of life, new providing for one another . . .

Elijah emerges, in the woman's estimation anyway, as someone with a new authenticity. She says of him "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth". New wisdom, new sharing of life, new providing for one another . . .

-ooOoo-

So there it is. A story about a time of drought, about people maybe wanting to do old fashioned and simple things like eating cake and drinking coffee, but having to deal instead with restriction and frustration. A story about the presence in the house of a prophet who talks about God but initially sees the community as his own pantry. A story about how that faith figure turns, over time, from arrogance to love and weeping. And back now, from that story, we come to our time and our place - admittedly a place where we're not starving, and a place where we, unlike our friends up North, can eat cake and drink a coffee. And yet maybe it's a place of some fatigue of the spirit - some tiredness with parts of how things are for us and for those among whom we live. I think it might be.

If, within our slightly tired time and place, we would be the life of God, then part of it might include piously saying to everyone "don't be afraid". Part of it also might be letting love allow us to be afraid for one another - to cry in the bedroom. Part of it might be helping others pick up the sticks and measure out the small supplies that must do for today. And part of it will be finding a new authenticity by actually caring about the community within which we live.

New wisdom, new sharing of life, new providing for one another . . . A moment of quiet.

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