

Sermon Archive 363

Sunday 28 November, 2021

Knox Church, Ōtautahi, Christchurch

Reading: 1 Thessalonians 3: 9-13

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



"To the distanced ones. Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face."

This sermon got written over a period of three days. Sometimes it works that way.

"To the distanced ones. Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face."

-ooOoo-

On Tuesday, here's what I wrote:

There is a woman in Tamaki Makaurau who enjoys the company of her daughter. Her daughter lives pretty much on the other side of town, but while the woman is in her nineties, she still can operate a vehicle to get her to the house of her daughter. Their love and concern for one another is amazing. They defend, protect, encourage and do all the other things in spades. I think you could say they need one another. It's an Auckland story, so of course Covid lockdown is a feature - separation. They've been able to be parts of each other's bubbles, so that's been fine. I love and honour the need of a daughter for her mother, and of the mother for her daughter. It is so good, in a time of physical distancing, that they can hold each other close.

Meanwhile, the mother has a couple of other offspring - males who live in places well beyond the bubble of Tamaki Makaurau.

The mother's principal motherly yearning, I think, is for one of the males to leave the remote country in which currently he resides. She wants him to come home. There's something about the Covid experience, with its closure of borders, and its complicating of the processes for reunion, that makes him feel further away than he really is. Geographically he's no further away that he ever was, but the epidemiology makes it feel like he is. So she wants him home.

The other male offspring resides one simple single domestic flight from her house. It may be, very soon, that he'll be allowed to hitch a ride on a plane that lands in her Tamaki Makaurau. Being a double vaccinated person, indeed he'll be allowed so to do. But he

doesn't think he should. He's not had to present his reasons, as such, but has assembled in his brain all the very good reasons why people with permission to fly ought not really to fly. One son has his absence excused by a persisting border closure. The other son has to negotiate his absence.

This part of the story ends with us rejoicing in the woman's company of her daughter. It notes the physical absence from her life of her sons. It must also note the really capable, independent, non-clingy, permission-giving attitude of the woman to her sons. She loves them, wants to hold them, and respects their being somewhere else. She's amazing. "Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face."

Within the same family unit, there was a man called Des. Keeping the woman described in the last few paragraphs company until he entered another dispensation, shall we say, he held a most precious place in our family life. Without any narrative drama, we need simply to report that he died. We miss him. Yes, his nature is squished onto us in many ways. What he gave us is lasting. We hold these weird religious hopes that he is not lost. But, in the ordinary trundling along of life, we just miss him. It's been a really long time since he spoke to us. We miss his living input. "Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face."

I don't miss Julius, since I think, on balance, he wasn't really a person of good faith. Meeting online in a fairly random way in 2009, we sort of tried to make of it something for about five years. Some of those five years involved him being in Aotearoa, with us kind of building a home together. Trying. Well, actually, not much trying as I could see. There came a point where I said "no" to all that, and halted communication. There are no longer any tears about the ending. He joins the ranks of those who are not just now part of life as lived by me. And indeed, in light of that particular situation, I feel I need to put a bit of a rahui around my universal declaration: "Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face."

Nevertheless, our life is textured by those who are not here - and a sense of separation.

-ooOoo-

That's what I wrote on Tuesday.

-ooOoo-

On Wednesday, at the regular 1:00pm Covid press conference, Chris Hipkins, the slightly more tired looking Minister for Covid Response, announced changes to MIQ requirement for Australia-based Kiwis wanting to come home. From 17 January next year, double vaccinated people, or people recently granted a negative test result will

be allowed to do home-isolation for seven days. David Seymour made a critical point about the dates around the reforms. Te Ahu Tama Meihana-Hosking was frustrated that the opening date fell a week before a family wedding he was hoping to attend. Judith Collins (of recent memory) called the Prime minister "the grinch who has stolen Christmas". Martin Newell, speaking for an organisation called "Grounded Kiwis", lamented the missed funerals of the last year or so and the odd lottery protocols applied to the MIQ waiting lobby. Separation from their absent ones had made them angry to the point of not being able completely to enjoy a new immigration development. On behalf of the non-angry woman in Tamaki Makaurau, I almost get it.

Other people interviewed by Te Reo Irirangi o Aotearoa (Radio New Zealand) on Wednesday cried with relief. Grandparents spoke of new opportunity to cuddle grandchildren they'd not yet met. Friends spoke about longed-for reunions. One person's email to Wallace Chapman said "I am a speechless, sobbing mess - the emotions of the last couple of years all crashing down on me at once. I'm trying really hard to control the urge to wake my family up on the other side of the world just to say 'see you next year'."

Verity Johnson, a panellist on Wallace's programme said "I sobbed uncontrollably this afternoon . . . because my best friend rang me from Sydney, and she was like, I'm coming home. And I haven't seen her in two years; and it feels as though our lives have been put on hold for so long, and all these emotional moments that we couldn't celebrate or grieve or mourn - and now we have a date where we can kind of step back into our lives again. And I kind of feel like I've been re-born. So yes - very happy, very excited. I cannot wait to go to Australia."

"Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face."

-ooOoo-

So on Tuesday I'm thinking about absences in my life, those who are not here.

On Wednesday, I'm hearing a lot from a lot of people about their strong desire to be reunited with those from whom they're separated.

I wonder what I'll write on Thursday.

-ooOoo-

On Thursday, this is what I wrote:

Paul set up a little community in the Greek city of Thessalonica - a trade hub full of non-Jewish, so kind of outsider people who'd responded well to the news of Jesus. Then, as was his practice, once he felt they were OK to carry on in faith, he moved on to somewhere else to seed another community for Christ in some other place. His itinerant function, creating community here, moving on to create community there, always interacting deeply, then moving on to somewhere else - would have presented him with a really complicated challenge. Where do I belong? How do I relate to these communities that for a time were my only concern, when now I'm somewhere else, creating something else? How to feel? It's quite a challenge, how to continue to respond to those who now are people of my past . . .

Paul rose to the challenge by writing letters. It was the best thing he could do in his day - write to the communities he'd formed. From another stage of life, from another place on the globe, he wrote letters to the people he'd very deeply known.

And in one of these letters (in our season of letters), he says quite simply that he longs to see them again. "Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face."

A big theme of this letter to the Thessalonians is that of "reunion". There is a love that continues, that calls and doesn't die. There is a sense that our current experience of life and community lacks critical company from before. "Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face."

Can I suggest to you that our world, full of people who look for connection with others, is a world in which there is a Christmas longing? The world has some vestigial sense of its God being in its midst - being born, being one - growing up to reconcile, to bring together the scattered, to make peace of war, to make a unity of that which is separated. As we enter Advent, looking to Christmas, can I say that the world waits for some kind of reunion? Or that the God from whom somehow we've become isolated since that first Christmas, could visit us, make again a home among us - create a reunion? "Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face".

This Advent we're considering letters written in the name of God. And the first letter is from a God who seems to want to create a reunion for us - to be again, with us, the One who was born among us, creating community and love among us.

Away with the great separation! "Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face".

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