

Sermon Archive 378

Sunday 13 March, 2022

Knox Church, Ōtautahi, Christchurch

Lesson: Luke 13: 31-35

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



The person on the front of the order of service is Joel Kumeroa. At the time the photo was taken, eighteen months ago, Joel was an eighteen year old student at the Waikato Institute of Technology - studying to be a builder. The photo's an interesting study in framing and perspective. It's taken from below, so Joel looks tall. Physically, we're looking up to him. He has a line of sight that's not looking directly at us. He's looking to some point beyond - as if he's looking out for something - vigilant maybe. Or maybe he's focussing on some great principle or calling that's kind of hidden to us who are looking in the other way. Visionary. Next to him is a big concrete bridge - a solid object, capable of dealing with the force of the currents surging silently through the river. He's also the only human being in the shot - like he's a sort of stand-alone character. He's "the one". Have you noticed what's written on his t-shirt? "Champion". It's a really old label owned by the North American sports apparel company HanesBrand - going through something of a revival. There are young people all over the world wearing the champion label. There's nothing special about the shirt - but I'm sure the photographer was pleased to see it. It fits in well with all the other visual clues in frame.

The photo was taken on the site of where, a couple of days before, Joel had rescued an eleven year old boy from the river. The boy was struggling in what turned out to be a really dangerous current, and was well on the way to drowning. Joel, who'd been down at the river with friends, leapt into the water, swam across, grabbed and supported the boy, and brought him to safety. He made all the difference to what could have been a very sad outcome. That's why Radio New Zealand described him as "a hero". That's why the Stuff photographer took the photo the way he did. This young man had been brave.

As is sometimes the case in our sometimes self-deprecating culture, Joel downplayed what he did. Shooting down the theory that he'd been vigilant, he noted that he'd not noticed the boy at all, until another member of the public started shouting "save the boy". Shooting down the theory that he'd possessed any amazing physical strength, he admitted that he found the swim really, really hard. He said "I was kind of

struggling". Shooting down the theory that he'd done it single-handedly, he noted that the boy's family had met him half-way back to the shore to help him out. Shooting down the theory that he'd done it purely on adrenalin and without any concern for the risk, he noted that he'd done a clear risk assessment, just as he'd been taught to do in his surf life-saving course. He's actually a qualified life guard. When asked about that, Joel said he was grateful to his parents (especially his mother), who taught him how to swim (credit to others). He said "just as I did, anybody else could do the same if they had the proper training . . . anybody else could have done what I did".

As Joel says all these things, he's deflecting praise, and minimizing the significance of what he did. That's a Kiwi-cultural thing. But he's also illustrating the point that bravery isn't some magical thing in the moment. It's enabled by the responsible development of abilities and capacities. One of the capacities is the ability to swim. Another is the capacity to care. Another is the capacity to respond. And these are capacities that are developed over time. It's called "the building of character".

The American Lutheran, David Lose, writes:

I've often thought that there are at least two kinds of courage. One is the immediate and situational courage of the person who, in a moment of extreme need, summons the courage to face an imminent danger. This is the courage of the by-stander who pushes someone out of the way of oncoming traffic or jumps into a raging river to save someone struggling to swim at great risk to him or herself. Of course, such courage is not actually just a spur-of-the-moment kind of thing but ultimately is a display of character, an accumulation of traits and beliefs, training and patterns of behavior that have been developed and exercised over the long span of life preparing one to act courageously in any given moment.

There is a second kind of courage as well, this one displayed not simply in a single moment or act but in anticipating a significant, daunting, or even frightening challenge and not turning away from it but rather meeting it head on. This is also a matter of character – character that has emerged from a lifetime of facing fears and shouldering burdens and that is also being forged in the very moment of accepting challenges and responsibilities that one could avoid.

<http://www.davidlose.net/2016/02/lent-2-c-courage-and-vulnerability/>

David describes the slow building of character that, in the face of something frightening, enables a courageous response.

-ooOoo-

The Pharisees have identified something they reckon will frighten Jesus. They identify a slightly unhinged, but extremely powerful ruler who doesn't like Jesus at all. This ruler already has chopped off the head of John the Baptist. Everyone knows he's dangerous.

Whether the Pharisees are really concerned for Jesus, or whether they're just trying to find some way of frightening him off, so they don't need to deal with him, we can only guess. But whatever is the case, they tell him that Herod is dangerous, and that Jesus should withdraw. In the presence of that which is dangerous, the wise response, hence the advice they give, is to disappear.

The initial response by Jesus is kind of in keeping with the classic undaunted hero. He shows no fear; he refuses to let danger divert him. In fact, he displays defiance by insulting the danger. "You go and tell that fox I'm not going anywhere until I've finished my work."

The fox may be considered cunning - but foxes are also thieves. They break into chicken coops and do their killing when people aren't watching. They never pick on animals their own size. So, rather than backing down, Jesus is "upping the ante" by describing Herod as a loathsome coward and thief. Is that defiant? Is it brave? Is it pure adrenalin in the moment? Or has some cultivation of character made it possible? And what does it mean for the Jesus people, if that's the example given by the "Lord"? Are we called to be super-humans who obviously "win the day"?

Before going too far down that track, we need to look a bit at what Jesus *then* finds himself saying. He goes on to talk about how he's a prophet, and how prophets quite regularly have been killed in Herod's jurisdiction. He goes on to describe the work he's doing in terms of the image of the mother hen, trying to gather her chicks under her wings. The mother hen, and the chicks under her wings, of course, are perfect food for foxes - you know, the classic image of the fox with the dead chicken in its mouth. So, Jesus' defiance of Herod turns quickly into something rather more vulnerable. He's not turning back. He's keeping resolute, but the imagery he's using is much more fragile - much more open to the natural conclusion when hen and fox come face to face. It's a more defeated expression of not being defeated. It's something of a paradox. The hen having clucked, the mouse having roared, holds its line (fed by Christian character, by Christ-courage), while admitting that in some more immediate ways, the final goal notwithstanding, the fox is likely to win.

-ooOoo-

It is reported that a significant number of Russian citizens are deeply troubled by what their government is doing in Ukraine. Some of the younger ones have taken to protesting - cardboard placards raised in the streets. Generally it takes the fox about twenty seconds before the placards are removed, the young ones are beaten with batons and bundled into the back of vans. The fox is doing what it does - and it has all the teeth required to do it. Go, tell that fox . . . That young people are willing to protest within an environment where the fox is bound to win, says something about the character that has been grown in these young ones. They must know the cost.

Meanwhile, on a subway train, an elderly Russian woman is sitting in her seat, minding her own business of being elderly and frail, while wearing a headscarf coloured blue and yellow. She also, moved by a sense of what is wrong, is saying something to the fox. And the wisdom of her years is enabling her to do it in a way that is impossible for the fox to respond to. Apparently, also, sunflowers are selling quite well in Russia at the moment. And there is subversive power in placing flowers in window frames and public places. Go tell that fox.

The fox, of course, both today and in the days of Jesus, will win in the immediate future. He's got the teeth. But Jesus, filled with character that is fed by the nurturing of God, speaks of continuing his work, until it is finished on the third day. *"See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the times comes when you say 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord'."*

Not cowed by fear, drawing on the character that is nurtured by God, aware of the obvious power dynamic in the present (and of its cost), Jesus speaks of a time coming, when people will say "blessed is the one who comes in the name of God".

I dare, in Christ, to say that God does not require a super-human. Jesus presents himself as the mother hen - an image of commitment in vulnerability. God works among the people to produce a quality of character that "goes and tells the fox" - that leaps into the river because it has been made ready to leap into the river. Drawing on the costly character that we have seen in Christ, as we face the great third day. The defiance of the mother hen . . .

We keep a moment of quiet.

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