

Sermon Archive 379

Sunday 20 March, 2022

Knox Church, Ōtautahi, Christchurch

Lessons: 1 Corinthians 10: 1-13
Luke 13: 1-9

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Learning from history, so that we're not doomed to repeat it. Reflecting, to our own wiser success, on shared experience of humanity and public circumstance. Learning also from current events - from people who see the same moon as we see, just from different locations on the planet - who live, as it were, under the same cloud, who drink the same water.

Paul wants us to be liberated from the folly of tragic repetition, and Jesus wants us to operate with a more permission-giving patience. And so, let us pray.

-ooOoo-

Evaluating history is sometimes a tricky matter of balancing at least a couple of things. One of the things is our inclination to think that people of the past are somehow mired in some kind of primitive ignorance. You know, they did the best they could, without the enlightenment of modern science. Most of them believed the world was flat. Most believed that plagues could be resisted by uttering a blessing every time someone sneezed. They were superstitious. Their place along the slowly rising line of intellectual advancement made their world different from ours. And the same applied to their moral systems. They did the best they could, wallowing within the mud of their old-fashioned values. They were sexist, racist, imperialist. They were classist and homophobic. They believed in slavery. So when we're learning from history, we're reflecting on people who were bound to make mistakes that we wouldn't possibly make. We don't say that plainly; but our believing it occasionally pokes its head above the surface in our sepia moments.

The other thing, against which all that is to be balanced is the naive claim that the people of history, and we are just the same. The way they expressed

themselves, the way they explained their experiences, can just be read as if there's no been no cultural shift occurring. In his book, *Ghost Empire*, Richard Fidler talks about a trip he did with his fourteen year old son, Joe, around the city that used to be Constantinople. These days it's Istanbul; but way back when, it was Constantinople. Names change! Richard writes:

Tales of angels and devils intruding into the lives of everyday people were commonplace in Constantinople. The line between the physical and the metaphysical was blurry, if it existed at all. Demons, goblins and witches were as real as the house next door. God's will could be discerned from the clouds in the sky, and the Devil's presence could be sensed within a raking shadow in the street, in the maw of a rabid dog or within the psychotic words of a madman. As someone who is more of a history enthusiast than an historian, I chose to take some of these stories at face value, to place myself in the thought-worlds of the medieval men and women who saw a kind of cosmic resonance in everything around them. Their myths and phantasms tell something of their obsessions, anxieties and secret longings . . . There are wild stories attached to real people, like the insufferably virtuous St Irene, the floating nun. There's the story of Theodora, the bear-keepers daughter turned prostitute and comedian, who became a powerful empress. Our understanding of her has been somewhat skewed by a secret history written by Procopius, Justinian's bitchy court historian, who wrote at length, and in great detail, about her participation in preposterous and lurid public sex acts. Roman histories often portray talented and powerful women as whores and poisoners. Are the stories of Theodora an exaggeration or a slanderous lie? Could they possibly be true? We don't know . . . It's fair to assume that if a story seems too good to be true, then it probably isn't."

So Richard warns those who would learn from history to read history carefully. Don't assume that the way we would tell our stories is the way that our ancestors did. Just as we need to be careful not to dismiss our forebears as some kind of other species, so we need to let them be who they were - to tell their stories in their own way.

Scott Hoezee, a teacher at the Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan, notes that chapter ten of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians represents a true mangling of historical review. Thinking back over the story of Israel's exodus people, a purely Jewish community, Paul projects all sorts of

Christian interpretations. He presents them as a Jesus-following, baptism practising, eucharist consuming community - when they were nothing of the sort. Hoezee says *"If in a sermon for seminary any of my students did to the Old Testament what Paul does in 1 Corinthians 10, I would probably tell the student to start over or fail."*

Do you remember how I said that learning from history requires us to balance two unfortunate inclinations - the inclination to discount the way we tell our stories, and the inclination to cast our ancestors as a different, unenlightened species? Well, I guess, if we were to want to forgive Paul for his mangling of history, we'd do it on the basis that maybe he's trying to recover the ancestors from being a separate species. He's wanting us to receive them as people with whom we do have something in common. Just as, in Christ, we have sought a figurehead, so they sought a figurehead. Just as, in Christ, we have found daily bread from God, so they found daily sustenance from God in the gift of the manna. Just as we have sought ways of not dying of thirst in a wilderness, so did they. Paul is describing them in ways so as to give us some common ground in our basic human longings and needs. He mangles history as he does it - but he's wanting to say something connecting for us - something to build a sense of community between them and us. They are said all to have lived under the cloud. Do we? Is the cloud the indistinct thing they followed through the wilderness - or was it the world-covering mantle from which they escaped? Do we have one of those? They all passed through the sea? Is there some kind of universally given mercy, rescuing, that we might want to identify? And are there mistakes that they made, that we, in our time, might also parallel with our very own?

And that seems to be the desire of Paul - that we might consider ourselves sufficiently one with the ancestors, for us to be able to learn from the mistakes they made. Maybe it's as simple as that. The old adage of learning from history, so that we don't repeat it. "I don't want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters" says Paul. Times test us. No testing has overcome you that is not common to everyone. It is said that God will not let us be tested beyond our strength. ***That's not what history says!*** But maybe whether it becomes true or not depends on how well we listen and learn.

-ooOoo-

Jesus also, so it seems, is keen for us to learn. And he's not so worried, in his case, with ancestors and history. He's more concerned just now with current events and people who are closer to him in time. Do you remember the Galileans who fell prey to Pontius Pilate? That same Pontius Pilate who's still in office? Or those eighteen people, just the other day, who were killed when the tower collapsed on them? (Shall we have a Health and Safety investigation in which it's found that no engineer, no builder, no consenting body, is responsible?) Jesus explores the grapevine, what is called either community discourse or "chatter" suggesting that these unfortunates are something of a separate species. Misfortune (in Jesus' world, anyway) is often considered only to befall people who are sinners, people who are "worse offenders". There's some kind of assumption of blame that the community constructs in its thinking to put a distance between "them over there, in their sin and misfortune", and us here, in our virtue and blessedness. We are different; we are not the same.

Jesus says "no, I tell you". Then he speaks of an impatient gardener who wants to whip out an unproductive fig tree. The gardener is told not to be impatient; but to allow for nourishing to occur, for growth to come, for life to emerge. Don't be so quick to rip out what is struggling. Does that seem like a bit of a diversion from the basic theme of learning from the stories of others? Maybe . . .

-ooOoo-

I think, while we must acknowledge that world views evolve (or decay) over time, and while we must acknowledge that while one speaks English, one speaks te reo Maori, one speaks Ukranian and one speaks Russian, we all speak to one another - if God enables us to listen, and to learn. There must be the possibility for us not constantly to repeat the mistakes, or to judge the other, rip out the tree that doesn't give us what we expect. There must be this possibility, if God guides and people listen. What is the cloud under which all people live? What is the opening of the waters, through which we might go? What is the Word that makes us not unaware? As this part of the human story is written on what will one day be called history, what is the Spirit saying?

Don't you hate it when a sermon ends with nothing but questions! We keep a moment of quiet.

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