

Sermon Archive 381

Sunday 3 April, 2022

Knox Church, Ōtautahi, Christchurch

Lessons: Psalm 126

John 12: 1-8

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Before the sermon proper, let's spend a moment with the psalmist, who's doing some remembering - remembering some well-loved long-gone days. Do you remember when things were kind of simple and good - that dream-like time when our mouth was full of laughter? It was all kind of young and free. Death had yet to snatch any of us, and we didn't even know how strong and vital we were. Bright colours and innocence . . . Is the psalmist a fool to ask for that kind of life again? Is that lost way of life the kind of thing that can be restored? I don't know; it's impossible to unlearn certain things. Maybe some things can't be replaced. I don't know. But may those who go out weeping, bearing seed for sowing, come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

Wouldn't that be a great prayer to pray?

-ooOoo-

Many people feel that Bethany was like Jesus' special place, his safe place. Nazareth, his home town wasn't. He'd been rejected there, and moved to say "no prophet is ever accepted in his home town". Jerusalem (which he'd often had to visit, and to which the sealing of his fate was drawing him) was full of politics and power. Capernaum was where he'd gone recruiting, to start his movement - and it bustled with commerce and "coming and going". Bethany was quiet - and kind of emotionally honest. For someone who noted that while foxes have holes and birds have nests, the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head, there was something very much "of home" about Bethany. The word "Bethany" means "house of figs" - and that kind of fits. Simple food, prepared by friends, shared with love. Out of the way, uncomplicated, take off your shoes and be at home.

We're told that it was evening, so curtains drawn and the room lit by lamps, candles, maybe fire from the kitchen. Friends have taken their places around the table. I wonder whether their mightn't have been laughter in their mouths.

One of those at the table is Lazarus. And I wonder what it would have been like for Jesus to see him there. As Lazarus shares the bread and is part of the laughter, or part of the quiet, does Jesus take to thinking about life - the gift of life? "Lazarus, come out!" he'd cried, and Lazarus had. Martha had said "yes, Lord; I believe . . ." Here they'd believed in him. And now, with a living, breathing testimony to the peace of God sitting at their table (where otherwise there might have been one of those empty chairs), they share their bread with Jesus. (When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. On his way towards Jerusalem, and all that must happen there, he finds his safe place - among those who love him.)

Expressing her love, in her way (don't we all find our own ways of expressing love - some clumsy, some foolish, all beautiful if you know how to look at them), Mary opens her jar of perfume. She anoints his feet, and wipes them with her hair. The whole house takes on a fragrance. The beautiful deed infuses the air that everyone breathes. They breathe the fragrance of caring. At every level, colour, warmth, the sound of familiar voices, the bread broken in the hands, the very air that they breathe, this is safe, this is home, this is love, this is peace. A moment in time - the Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced. When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.

-ooOoo-

Judas is there as well - in this moment in time. He takes offence at what Mary has done, done with the perfume. He wants to talk about commerce and politics. He reminds the family that outside their cosy little gathering is a world seething with the poor who have wants and needs and who would be outraged at money going on perfume.

All of this, what Judas says, is true. The poor are with us - they always have been (and note when I speak of the poor, I use a third person pronoun - "they" - as if they are "them", not "us". (The poor: another species again.)

And indeed, for Judas, the poor are "not us". While he uses the poor as a way of destroying the ministry of love to Jesus, we know that he doesn't care for the poor. He was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it. "Money for the poor" became "money for Judas" - well an

opportunity, anyway, for Judas's gain. Judas is always on the look-out for pieces of silver.

So, in the person of Judas, not just commerce and politics, but also hypocrisy and almost fully-formed betrayal bursts in. It would seem that the world around this moment of love and worship will not allow love and worship to last. Love and worship, in the words of a psalm, end up being like those who dream ("they fly, forgotten as a dream dies at the opening day").

One might speak at length about the destructive power of theft and hypocrisy. One wouldn't need to go far at all to find examples that are apt and sad. One also could find multitudes of examples where the poor have ended up being pawns (expendable pawns) in games of politics. Quoting the presence of the poor is a really good way for cynical people to snatch some power. And I reckon that's pretty much what Judas is trying to do - the poor being an excuse for him to make some material gain. But let's not speak about that at length. Let's look instead at what happens now for Jesus.

Jesus immediately is hurled away from his experience of safety. His safe place disappears in an instant. Suddenly he's hurled back onto that road to Jerusalem. If his pilgrimage had moments of peace and beauty, then they were no insulation for him from the realities of wrestling with theft and emotional violence. In the very room he's in, a man (with lies, not laughter in his mouth) has had a savage go at a woman who's done a beautiful thing. "You stupid bloody woman", he says. You emotional idiot. For God's sake, what'd you do that for!" The poor are indeed suffering out there. They are press-ganged into Judas's crime of embezzlement, made victims of politics. But here, also victimised is Mary - subjected to emotional violence.

While Jesus cannot just now help the poor - noting that they will be always with us - he sure as hell can do something about the violence directed at Mary. Immediately he comes to her defence. "Leave her alone" he cries. He will not have her treated like this. As Jesus is hurled back onto his Jerusalem road, he lands on his feet and draws a certain line on that road. There is no place in his house of figs for violence against Mary. (Alas, we know that there will be further violence - some fed by politics, some sanctioned by authorities, some paid for with silver coins. But for Jesus, and those who live in his house of figs, this violence will always be unnatural, alien, not the food that we will share. Call it wrong - because that's what it is. Crucifixion, wrong. Violence, wrong.

Stealing from the purse, wrong. Death of the innocent, wrong.). Leave her alone, Jesus says. Leave her alone!

With that having been said, he then says that he knows this perfume, stolen by the words of a hypocrite, has found its way into being meaningful in terms of his burial. He reminds them that while poverty will always be with them, he won't be. Indeed, he says "you do not always have me". He's on his way to the cross. The restoration of the fortunes of humanity, this good news that will be like the watercourses in the Negeb (dry plains watered in season such that flowers and colour and abundant life bursts out) comes at a cost. The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. The Son of Man finds his house of figs desecrated. The Son of Man will be valued at thirty pieces of silver.

Before all that happened, we found Jesus resting in his safe place. Six days before the Passover, at which point it will all turn bad, Jesus stops for a rest at Bethany, his home.

-ooOoo-

As we did before, let's spend a moment again with the psalmist, who's doing some remembering - remembering some well-loved long-gone days. Do you remember when things were kind of simple and good - that dream-like time when our mouth was full of laughter? It was all kind of young and free. Death had yet to snatch any of us, and we didn't even know how strong and vital we were. Bright colours, innocence . . . Is the psalmist a fool to ask for that kind of life again? Is that lost way of life the kind of thing that *can* be restored? Maybe some things can't be replaced, and maybe it's impossible to unlearn certain things. I don't know. But a good prayer would be this: may those who go out weeping, bearing seed for sowing, come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves. May resurrection come. Indeed, may its coming be our prayer.

A moment of quiet.

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