

## Sermon Archive 382

Sunday 10 April, 2022

Knox Church, Ōtautahi, Christchurch

Lesson: Luke 19: 28-40

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



John's grandfather, the Very Reverend Andrew Cameron, had been a mover and shaker. He had a most magnificent moustache. He'd held important roles in the Presbyterian Church and done ambitious things like founding Knox College. To found a College requires contacts at the university, the capacity to get people to part with their money, the ability to share a vision. And these were all things that Andrew Cameron did well. His obituary describes him as "a pioneer in education and social service, and a man of wide influence in Church and society - a man of great distinction".

John, a life-long bachelor, was quieter than his grandfather. Following an attempt at Medical School in the early 1950s (from which he withdrew - medicine, it seemed, did not make him happy), he was accepted for training for the ministry. So he ended up living at the College founded by his grandfather. By all accounts, John threw himself diligently into the life of the College. Funny expression: "throwing yourself diligently". Normally you'd throw yourself "wholeheartedly". I used the word "diligent", because "wholehearted" gives the impression of "confidence", "abandon". And those words don't fit with John. He was shy. The records show that he faithfully attended most College events, but not the ball. Finding someone to dance with, committing to a night of conversation and social engagement was just not something he then could do. He had intelligence, thoughtfulness, kindness (I think), but conversation wasn't easy. While he made deep friendships that lasted decades with people who took time to get to know him, lots of people never heard him say a word. He kept many moments of quiet.

From very early in his studies, he spent a lot of time in the Hewitson Library. "Diligence" is again the word. A fellow student and Presbyterian ordinand called Maurice bumped into him in the library one day. He found him studying a Bible passage in its original Greek language. It was the passage that read "Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord". Maurice read it out loud - I think in Greek. John replied, also in Greek I think. They said to each other "Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord". Two scholarly young men, one of whom was very shy, said each to the other "Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord". I wonder

if John felt like Maurice, who had come into the library and fashioned a conversation for someone who found conversation difficult, was in fact a perfect manifestation of "someone come in the name of the Lord" - a God-send person.

I did not notice it myself, but I understand that John and Maurice would often, over the next seventy years of their friendship, greet one another with the expression: "blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord". Other people used more standard forms of greeting (hello, good morning, even latterly Kia ora, but these two had their holy text and private practice.

Maurice spoke at John's funeral earlier this year. He it was who made the observation that John had avoided the Knox College ball. He it was who acknowledged John's shyness - and saluted the quiet man for whom speaking required a lot of courage. He talked about a gentle, quiet friendship of seventy years. And when he had finished speaking of all this, he put his hand on the coffin and said "John, blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord". Then he returned to his seat.

-ooOoo-

Hey! Shall we go to the library together, and check out a Bible passage? Let's let it be the story of someone riding into Jerusalem. The entrance can't be described as a grand one, since the person's riding a colt. No war horse for this rider - just a little donkey. And yes, there's reasonably recent scholarship arguing that it's staged in a deliberately "down home", satirical style in order to mock the overblown war imagery used by the Romans in their processions - fretting their hour upon the stage - full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. But that's kind of like another sermon not being preached today. Here we have no one grand or boastful, riding simply into a city. And the people who see it, not distracted by anything grand, find themselves shouting out that this is God being brought into their midst. This is no "welcome to the city, visitor". This is no standard secular greeting used by everybody else (hello, good morning, Kia ora). No, this reaction is saying "you are bringing God into this moment. You are "God-ing" this place. Your coming is a "coming in the name of the Lord". This is what they're saying.

Immediately, of course, there's an objection. It comes from the Pharisees, who are like the censorious librarian of old doesn't allow talk in the library. They want the people to hush, to not speak. "Tell them to be quiet, Jesus", they say. Whereupon Jesus replies: "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

When God graces the moment, when God is present in the place, even stones find a voice. You can't stop it. That's just what happens to creation when God is perceived as present. A new speaking, a new praising, a new conversation between friends in the faith. When God rides into that space within which we live, stones start to sing. It doesn't matter how strongly the Pharisees object. It doesn't matter how much they want the voice hushed up; when God arrives, there is no stopping the song.

I wonder what that means. Obviously, by telling the story of John and Maurice, and the friendship that came out of a Bible reading, by speaking of a friendship created around a Palm Sunday praise, by describing a friendship that was the context for John to find confidence to speak, despite his being shy, I'm saying something about the presence of Christ - Christ being present when one human being cares for another. That's why I tell the story of "blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord". But there's another side to this coin - a side that expresses how the Pharisees' call for silence can never actually work. It's a story about the persistence of the Church's speaking.

We have the case of a silent Russian bishop and the stone-song of Rowan Williams, one time Archbishop of Canterbury and a bit of an expert on the topic of the Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition - the tradition of much of the church currently in Russia. In a recent BBC radio interview [[https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p0bz1sjk?fbclid=IwAR1bTjozTvPvsY15cB9znKzSpl\\_bCL1176Df12A2m0J6FT7qbNU6M8YZ-sQ](https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p0bz1sjk?fbclid=IwAR1bTjozTvPvsY15cB9znKzSpl_bCL1176Df12A2m0J6FT7qbNU6M8YZ-sQ)], Archbishop Williams notes that the Patriarch of Moscow, Patriarch Kirill, so far has said nothing about the situation Ukraine. Is his silence something of the sort of desire the Pharisees have for the people be quiet? In response to the question "do you think the Russian Orthodox Church is being used by Vladimir Putin, or do you think there's a kind of meeting of minds here", Archbishop Williams says: *"I suspect that Putin really does believe the story that he's telling the world about the Russian world, the Russian sphere of influence, the integral, historical Russian identity - but it certainly suits him to have a fairly compliant church establishment. And the church establishment, conversely, does quite well out of Putin's regime - lots of expensive new churches being built, lots of privileges for the church hierarchy."*

To the question "To what extent can you sympathise with Patriarch Kirill in believing that they are battling for the survival of their unique Russian culture, they're defending Orthodox Christianity from the Godless West", the archbishop replies: *"I can understand how that works; what I can't understand, and can't begin to*

*condone, is the way that it is seen as compatible with a nakedly aggressive, unprincipled act of violence against a neighbouring Christian nation. I'm still waiting for any senior voices in the Russian Orthodox hierarchy to say that the slaughter of the innocent in war is condemned unequivocally by all forms of Christianity . . . I feel as if the current leadership of the Church is in danger of betraying everything that is most precious in terms of what Russian Christianity has given to the wider world. . . . When a church is actively supporting a war of aggression, failing to condemn nakedly obvious breaches in any kind of ethical conduct in war time, then other churches do have the right to raise the question, and to challenge the church and say unless you can say something effective about this, something recognisably Christian about this, we have to look again at your [presence in the body of Christ] . . . We have seen no signs from the hierarchy even to ask for a ceasefire, and that would be, if you like, the minimum I would hope to see."*

The interviewer asks Dr Williams what he would say, given the chance to speak to Patriarch Kirill. *"I would say 'your own flock are being killed in Ukraine by other members of your own flock. It is your responsibility to condemn the killing of your own flock for whom you are responsible to Jesus Christ'."*

So says the one time Archbishop of Canterbury. While something of the spirit of the Pharisees has called for silence in Russia (tell them to be quiet), another voice speaks up. If **these** were to fall silent, even the stones will shout out in their stead. The voice stirred up by the presence of Christ among the people will not be silenced.

-ooOoo-

John's grandfather, the Very Reverend Andrew Cameron, had been a mover and shaker. John, a life-long bachelor, was quieter than his grandfather. But when, within the body of Christ, friendship was extended (when the Christ arrived), he was able to speak. Blessed is the One who enabled that to happen. In another place and time, an extremely articulate priest becomes an expression of stones speaking out, once Pharisees have called for the people to be silent. There is something about the presence of Christ, the God-ing of the place, that gives voice to creation. Blessed be the One who enabled **that** to happen.

We'll keep a moment of quiet.

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