

Sermon Archive 384

Sunday 17 April, 2022

Knox Church, Ōtautahi, Christchurch

Lessons: Luke 24: 1-12

Acts 10: 34-43

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Most years, the Easter sermon is a response to the Good Friday reflection.

On Good Friday this year, the reflection, called "Ways of Distraction", was about the measures taken by those in the Passion story to create a distance between themselves and what was happening to Jesus (What is it to you? It's nothing to do with me).

We looked at the soldiers, distracting themselves from their murderous work by rolling dice and playing games. We looked at the Pharisees, hiding in the claim that purity and solemnity is more important than justice and innocence. We looked at Pontius Pilate, vainly trying to wash his hands of the blood of an innocent man. And we looked at Peter, denying Jesus three times, as if conscience was not going to trouble him.



In each of these examples, there was an element of "self-defeating denial of the truth". Today's Easter sermon looks at resurrection as the joyful reclaiming of truth and the giving of hope. The sermon is called "Truth and Hope".

Matthew.

On the front cover of the order of service, there are two paintings of the risen Jesus, each commissioned and painted in Italy within twenty five years of the other. I wonder which one's your preferred risen Christ.



The one on the left, by Sandro Botticelli, looks like a precious wee soul. There's something in the posture of his right hand that looks almost as if he's saying "yoo hoo"! In fact there's something in his hair, the tilting of his head, the curve to his legs, the light grip on the tilted flag staff, the softness of his skin that makes him look twink-like, quite feminine.

There's also something about how his feet look slightly elevated from the lip of the tomb that makes him seem a tiny bit floaty - could we say "removed from the earth"? His grave clothes are white - which is kind of code in renaissance symbolism for purity. This is the pure Lamb of God, the gentle kind we could expect to

be great at turning the other cheek. In these sorts of ways, he's quite different from the second Jesus, by Piero della Francesca.



Francesca's Jesus faces us straight on, and he's "built like a brick house". Strong neck, solid chest, abdominals flexed. His grip on the flag pole is firm, and holds it with an almost military perpendicularity. While the Botticelli Jesus looks like his flag might get dropped, Francesca's Jesus has got a sort of "none shall pass" thing going on. No pure white clothes for Francesca's Jesus either. He's dressed in red, like he's fresh from a bloodbath. He's been in the wars and doesn't look ready to turn the other cheek. As for his feet, they're firmly on the ground. It's like he's anchored. Botticelli's Jesus might well blow away on a breeze; this Jesus shall not be moved.

Another difference between the Jesuses is the landscape behind them. Botticelli's landscape looks well-manicured, like a formal garden. There are two rock formations, each the same as the other. The sky has no clouds. Francesca's sky has clouds in it. That sky looks like it might be changeable, cause problems for fishermen on the local lake. And beneath the sky, his landscape looks like a bombsite - kind of divoted and patchy ground. Looking at that broken landscape, one art analyst notes that while the whole land is scrappy, to our left of the risen one, the trees all are dead. No leaves on those branches - while the trees to our right are beautiful - they're healthy, leafy and green. It's like the figure of the risen one is something like a gateway between a world of decay and a world of growth. It's like this figure makes a difference to the battered landscape in which he stands. He gives a gift to the world, of moving from a realm of death to a realm of life.

Painted in the same country within twenty five years of each other, these are quite different Jesuses. They do, of course, have things in common. Both are carrying wounds to their hands, feet and side. Notice that they both are wearing their different coloured clothes in a way so as to expose the spear wound to the side. Both have been victims of the soldiers on crucifixion duty (the same soldiers whom, on Friday, we caught rolling dice and playing games - necessary distraction from the horror, we thought). Both are holding a flag up high - with a blood red cross on it. Holding up a great waving, flapping thing. What did we say of those religious types on Friday who wanted the sign taken down (as well as the body) so the evidence wasn't so public? And here is Jesus, waving his flag - "look at me!" Both are wearing haloes, which look a bit like crowns - the authority of the King - nobler than the authority of the one who had authority but lost it down

the sink while washing his hands. If Good Friday showed us the ways of distraction, this risen One (be he red or white, gentle lamb or brick house, be he soft or strong, slightly floaty or anchored to the earth) this risen One says "you can't hide from what is true". Jesus Christ was killed in public, and the whole world saw it happen. Truth!

That's where Peter begins *his* Easter sermon to the people in Caesarea - speaking the truth, talking about what happened to Jesus. Peter's preaching his sermon in the house of Cornelius, and good man who's open to the speaking of God, but who's also a centurion. He's a soldier in the same army as those who rolled dice for Jesus' tunic. He's a soldier taking authority from the same authority that washed its hands of an innocent prisoner. But despite all this implication and the embarrassment it might cause in this house, rather than steer away from the ugly truth, Peter names it; it's as if he knows there's no way forward in faith, until the wrong has been described as wrong. Easter is a day of truth. It's not a day for the truth to be forgotten, pushed aside. Nor, though, is it a day for that truth to be all that there is. What else is there? Well, the obvious fact that Botticelli's Jesus dances and floats, because he's alive. Francesca's Jesus stands tall and proud - because he's alive. Each Jesus waves high his flag, saying "behold - no longer in the tomb am I". On Easter, Truth has a new friend; the friend is life; the friend is hope. Not just truth, but truth and hope of life.

In keeping with that, Peter goes on to say to those who were implicated in the "turning away", that forgiveness of sins is theirs through the grace of the One who lives. "In every nation, anyone who fears God and does what is right, is acceptable to God." Not everything was killed on Friday. And to the right of Francesca's

Jesus, the dead trees are coming to life. For Botticelli's Jesus, the pierced hand is raised in blessing. Name the truth, proclaim the hope. Where once there was death, now there is life. He is risen; he is risen indeed.

-ooOoo-

Maybe that would be a good place to end this Easter sermon. But I would have failed as an art critic (and indeed as a Christian theologian) were I to omit to note one important last thing that the two Jesuses have in common. Quite clearly in common is the fact that each Jesus has an audience that's fallen asleep. Bugger! Those to whom the risen One comes are failing to notice. Botticelli's "yoo hoo" has been too twee to wake the sleepy. Francesca's Jesus may have placed his foot solidly on the ground, but it's a bare foot, and it makes no rousing sound. Could it be that it's not just when humanity is being wilfully self-distracting that it misses seeing the Christ? Could it be that "will or not", we bear something, something like sleep, that closes our eyes to the miracle and mystery of God's own doing?

Possibly not; the sleeping soldiers are maybe just an artist's way of saying that resurrection is not an event to be witnessed. No gospel describes anyone seeing it happen. The witness of the church has only ever been about arriving a wee bit late - after the fact (if you want to call it "fact"). Luke's gospel, read at the start of the service, is an example. Before they have a chance to see anything, it's reported that Jesus isn't there - has already gone. All they get to see (apart from two dazzling angels) is the empty space where he isn't, trying to draw together the "doesn't make sense" of the angels, and other things that maybe Jesus said ages ago - when they were in no position to understand what on earth he was talking about. Scratching the bits together, trying to form of it something credible,

they pass on their Easter theory to the men back at home, many of whom dismiss it as an idle tale (the human being sleeps - its eyes do not see - seems also as if its ears don't hear. No wonder the artists paint everyone but the Christ unconscious).

But this is not a day to be cynical about humanity and its capacity to notice the risen Jesus - for one person in Luke's Easter story doesn't sleep. Peter gets up and goes to see what the women have described. Also having seen nothing of Jesus, just as the women saw nothing of Jesus, he returns home amazed. We later find him preaching Easter to Cornelius, testifying to having become a witness to what God has done. Truth - even when presented as a kind of absence, has woken up part of Christ's sleeping audience. And I think that's part of what we call "Christian hope". Truth and hope. Easter. Truth and hope.

-ooOoo-

Here's an Easter Ode

Rouse me, risen Christ,
from my human slumber,
that with my eyes, my ears and my soul
I might be a witness of your being alive.
Whether you come to me as the strong man,
or the one who dances with the wind-blown leaves and feathers,
may I welcome you with trust, hope and love.
May the truth within which you stand
be the ground upon which I stand.
May the life that fills you
be the hope that I hold.
May I ever have words to speak of your Passion,

and may my heart always be a home for your Easter.

Truth and hope come from you.

You are risen.

You are risen indeed.