

Sermon Archive 386

Sunday 1 May, 2022

Knox Church, Ōtautahi, Christchurch

Reflections on Matthew's Gospel

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Local artist, Pete Majendie, created an exhibition last year, "Matthew's Gospel", for the community at South West Baptist Church, whose leadership team was doing an extended exploration of Matthew's gospel. Pete agreed graciously to loan the works to Knox, so that we could use them at two services (1 and 8 May) as stimuli for our Biblical and spiritual reflection. Knox is very grateful to Pete.

As I sometimes do, I decided not to preach a sermon, but to deliver a series of reflections, readings and musical interludes.

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About Matthew's Gospel

Here's a potted summary of Matthew's version of the story of Jesus. It was written by someone who was Jewish at a time (second generation Christian) when the church was becoming increasingly Gentile - that is full of people who weren't Jewish. In some ways, you might then call the author a square peg in an increasingly round hole. Why would you start your gospel with a big long, far from fascinating genealogy? You'd do it to cast Jesus in the context of the Jewish history and people. In ways that the other gospels don't, Matthew's version works to present Jesus as the Son of David, the longed-for Messiah, the Answer to Israel's ancient Question.

After the genealogy and birth stories, but before the passion and resurrection conclusion, there are five "narratives and discourses" - stories and "teaching sections related to the stories". Matthew's Jesus is a teacher - a new Law Giver. So a lot of the material has Jesus talking about the old Law and a new interpretation. Again it's the relationship of old Jewish Faith to new Christian expression. Is he abolishing the Law? No. He's making it new, alive. The

kingdom of heaven, already here, is emerging, and for those who are able to see that, there's a new freedom, a new identity, a new orientation for "being in the world".

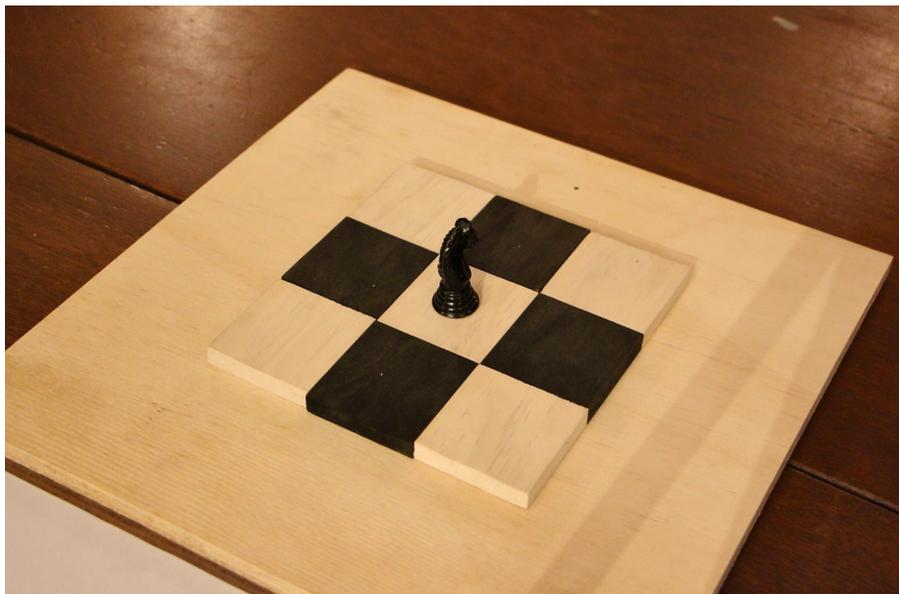
So the author composes, the church listens, the artist creates, and the preacher reflects. Three reflections on four artworks: the chess board works, the Bible Piano, and the Burden of Light.

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Reading: Matthew 7: 7-11

A Reflection on the chess board works

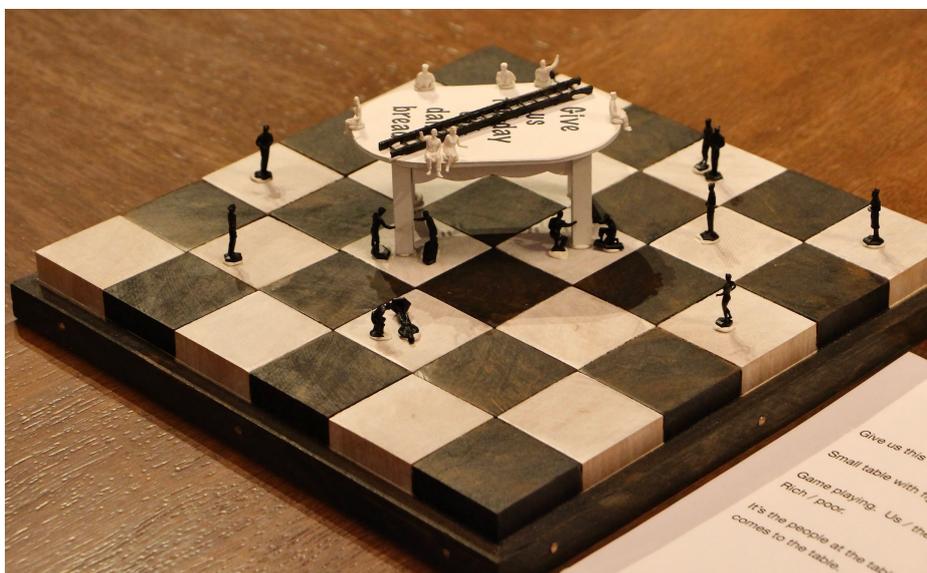
Is the world a big place, or just a small one? I guess that kind of depends. It's small if it comes down to news of what's happening. As soon as it happens, graphic images arrive straight away into the newsfeed. But it's big, if you're here, and you want to go there, and all sorts of things are getting in the way. A closed border, a government policy, any length of red tape. Not that I want the whole world to be my parish - I don't need to go and be everywhere. I really only need enough of the world so that I can move about a bit. Some say that that nine spaces on the wider chess board should be enough. Nine's more than eight, and for God's sake, I can only be in one space at a time. I should be content.



The trouble is that I'm a knight. I ride a horse designed to go one step here, but only then if I can do two steps there. Or two steps here and one step there - you know how I work. So being placed in the middle of my nine spaces, my natural movement won't work. I can't actually go anywhere that is right for me. And if I kind of compromise my nature and move a smaller movement within what space allows, suddenly I've broken the rules of the game and people shout at me that I'm cheating. Did I break the law and hope that no one would notice? Or did I do it brazenly, as an act of protest? Who's to know - but whatever's the case, I become a law breaker. The sharply demarcated "black and white" of the world allows me no room at all.

I don't know that the artist had me in mind, in particular. I know he thought of the poor. He's asked the question: "where are the poor supposed to go?" Is being poor a crime? Is any law being broken? Well, not if the piece stays still in the middle of its "no movement" world.

There's another chess board - one that's a whole lot bigger - so surely there's room here for rather more movement. Well, rather more movement, providing you don't want to move up.



If you want to move up, you're going to need the ladder, and the ladder is in the possession of those who already are at the table. You're not going to

get access to the table unless they let you in. And so far, judging by the whiteness of those on the table, and the blackness of those not at the table, chances aren't looking good for a whole lot of access. While in the previous work about the Knight who is trapped, the rule enforcers are invisible. In this work they're exposed. They will, no doubt, point out that there's a lot of options for those stuck down below - and the options included black ones and white ones. Everything's fine - options for all. O really?

Reading: Matthew 5: 3-10

Musical Interlude

Reading: Matthew 9: 9-13

A Reflection on the Bible Piano

As a couple of cultures sparked off each another, he told them to go off and learn what this means: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice".

On a Sunday after ANZAC Day, our public space hasn't been short of references to "sacrifice", and the almost hushed and sacred way it's used. It conjures up in us all manner of feeling about service and honour and bravery - and sadness and loss. It's a deep thing - not the sort of thing Jesus perhaps ought to suggest he doesn't want. I wonder what it is he doesn't want, when he says he'd rather have mercy.

Mercy is, almost by definition an empathetic thing. It's about people. You don't have mercy on a principle. You don't have mercy on a cause. You have mercy on a person. It's personal. My heart, your heart. My situation, your situation. Your need, my capacity. Caring. Feeling for.

You can sacrifice some of your money. You can sacrifice your time. Indeed, you can sacrifice your life. But it's not quite so specifically inter-personal. Etymologically, sacrifice *"derives from the Latin sacrificium, which is a combination of the words sacer, meaning something set apart from the secular or profane for the use of supernatural powers, and facere, meaning "to make."* In the Christian realm, then, it's a God-directed concept. And it can become a highly regulated one as well. One sacrifice specified for

one occasion. Regulations pertaining to the when, where and how. If sucked into a technical observance vibe, it can become more about duty than devotion. Maybe that's what Jesus was getting at. Not sacrifice, but the more emotionally connect "mercy".

The occasion of Jesus' talking about sacrifice and mercy was when his disciples had been criticised by experts in religious law for the kind of company they were keeping. They were dining with quote / unquote "many tax collectors and sinners". For all their expertise in the Law, the religious experts saw only sinners, rather than people. Empathy? Recognition of persons? Consideration of the need, the predicament, the heart?

Do you think that Law can harden, ossify, turn rock-like? Do you think that faith can become like a march, rather than a dance? Is this what Jesus is getting at?



The artist's Bible Piano is the gospel as music - as melody and song - as movement, beauty, joy, sorrow - as ear-worm. The artist quotes the American Presbyterian Frederich Buechner, "Jesus didn't come to abolish the law, but to make it sing".

Go off and learn what this means, Jesus says: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice".

Musical Interlude

Reading: Matthew 11: 28-30

A Reflection on "My yoke is easy and my burden is light"

The artist knows full well, because he's a clever man, the difference between an adjective and a noun. But artists are allowed to be intellectually playful; they're allowed to explore "what ifs". So he asks what if, when Jesus says his burden is light, light wasn't an adjective, but a noun. The burden of light. "Burden" is a wearying word. Can light be a burden?

Consider a tower of old suitcases;



the black paint makes of them less a collection of separate, portable bits; it makes them feel more of an indivisible unit. I dare you to try and carry it as it is - all at once, all on your own. Indeed, it's taller than the minister. (Some things are.) This big, heavy mass of baggage would be a daunting burden.

Jesus looks at the people; earlier he's spoken to those among them who are poor in spirit, who are in mourning, who are meek and hungry, who are persecuted and longing to make peace. It's obvious that they're burdened. And he's seen the experts in the Law, working more happily with articulating sacrifices than extending mercy - tying extra burdens like millstones around

their necks. And he carries with himself the burden of caring about that. What kind of a burden is it to care for people who are struggling? Is it something like a giant tower of suitcases?

He offers them his burden of light. From within what he carries, light shines. From inside the great tower there comes another image - people carrying not heavy, dark cases - but light. Bearers of light.

"You are the light of the world", he says. "A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one, after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house . . ."

The kingdom of heaven, already here, is emerging; and for those who are able to see that, there's a new freedom, a new identity, a new orientation for "being in the world". Not sacrifice, but mercy - the gospel dancing and singing. Light shining from the baggage - calling people to be light-bearers themselves.

Next week we'll explore some more works and thoughts from Matthew. For now, we, a people of the emerging kingdom of heaven, will sing a hymn.