

Sermon Archive 387

Sunday 8 May, 2022

Knox Church, Ōtautahi, Christchurch

Reflections on Matthew's Gospel - 2

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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The Disciples' Journey

Last week, we looked at Matthew as someone who wanted to show how Jesus fitted into the faith of the ancestors - how Jesus-the-teacher was making the old Law sing a new song.

Today, we're looking at some of the experiences of those who joined Jesus on the journey. What does it mean to be called to follow the new Law Giver? What does it mean to become a disciple? It's not so much a matter this week of "where has this come from?" Now it's more a matter of "where is this going?" Frederick Dale Bruner, an American Reformed theologian, broke his commentary on Matthew into two volumes. He called the first part "Matthew: the Christ book", and the second part "Matthew: the Church book". It's a similar shift that we're making. Christ appears, he teaches (last week). And (this week) a community of faith rises up from the teaching - the community of the disciples of Jesus. Provoking our thoughts on the journey are four artworks: the chair and the hour glass; the bottle holder and lunch box; the

door chair; and kite flying. We begin with Matthew's record of the calling of the first disciples.

Reading: Matthew 4: 18-22

Reflection: the rimu chair on a plinth with hour-glass



Every person who professes Christian faith through participation in Christian community has, in some way, found a way onto the journey. Some are born into it. Others come into it a little later. However we commence the journey, if we're still on it, then there has to be some reason for that. In some way or another, it has to be feeding us, drawing us along. Otherwise we'd have chosen some other journey to join. Maybe in the 1950s we might have stayed because it was considered the proper thing to do - being seen in church. But not now. Now there has to be some sense of being engaged by the person of Jesus, or his teaching, or the life of his people. There has to be a sense of the disciple saying to him "Lord, to whom should we go? You have the words of eternal life". Unfortunately that John's gospel, not Matthew's. So moving right along!

When the first disciples were invited by Jesus to follow him, along they went. Matthew doesn't say why, only that Jesus told them that they'd be fishing for people; something in that image may have struck them.

Whatever attracted them, it necessitated leaving their boats behind, doing something new (new and old; the old made new, ancient Law learning to sing. You have only one life; you've spent it so far fishing; what are you going to do with the rest of it?) I commend to you the text called "Today" that goes with the rimu chair and hour-glass. It makes the point that all your previous days have brought you to this one. All days-to-come stretch from here. Today is something of a nexus - the only day that actually "is". So, in their moment of "is", four disciples decide to accept the invitation to follow the One who calls them. One imagines they were somewhat excited. Just as well he hasn't spoken to them yet of suffering, of being broken, and dying.

On a wee note just before the next reading, last week the hour-glass fell from the rimu chair and broke. The first instinct was to replace it, to restore the work, to enable it to continue whatever it was taken to have said at previous exhibitions. But then, in conversation with some Knox people, the artist wondered whether a broken hour-glass actually says something helpful about the nature of time. Once time has gone through the glass, can you really turn it upside down and have it a second time? Where did Jesus go? He was here yesterday, inviting us to come. Can we try that again? And the minister also had a thought. He wondered if the work, now broken, was able to say something that it never could when it was whole, undamaged. For maybe there's some kind of gospel that you can only express once you have suffered hurt . . .

Reading: Matthew 16: 21-23

Musical Interlude

Reading: Matthew 14: 13-20

Reflection: wine bottle holder and lunch box

At this point along their journey, the disciples have been joined by others - by a *lot* of others. And they're showing some empathy. They're noting that people need to eat. And it seems that they're trying to be realistic about this vagrant life they've entered into. Once you've left your boats, once

you've stepped away from the home that's always fed you, then you may not be in a position to feed anyone else. Maybe hunger is to be one of the costs of discipleship. Hunger "on and of" the road.

At the front of this church, there's a table - standing for the hospitality of God. And its size, its bulk, says something (perhaps too loudly) of the church's capacity to feed the people. Also here, near the table, is a picnic box. Picnic boxes are designed to be carried. They speak of being fed while we're not at home - life "on and of" the road.



As they assess what life on the move is like (their lack of a solid table), the disciples, God bless them, recommend sending the people away. Jesus, though, tells them to use what they can find, and feed the people with that. Could you possibly find bread in the box? No one dreams of a chocolate fish. As for a bottle of wine hidden in a box . . . !

Musical Interlude

Reading: Matthew 20: 20-28

Reflection: the door chair

Here's a chair much more solid than the rimu one. Well, the artist probably meant this to present a contrast. In the blurb for the rimu chair he wrote "No sitting down, it will not support you . . ."



But *this* one's clearly something that you can sit on. It's got strength. On it you could definitely take up the practice of being sedentary. Shame then that it's made of doors - of things that remind you of opening, of going through, of revealing something beyond their lintel and frame. Jesus talks about knocking on the door, of the door being opened. (In fear, disciples shut doors. In faith, Jesus opens them.)

The mother of two disciples asks Jesus to give her sons seats of honour, next to him. She wants good, solid seats where they can remain (to the left and the right - fixed, clearly defined positions for al time) - like a prize. You've made it, boys! A chair that's strong enough to let you stop and stay. The chair is not a door; the door is a chair - says Mum.

Jesus says "you don't know what you're asking". The kind of chair she seeks for her sons is not what Jesus is offering. Drink the cup I drink, serve one another. Knock, seek, ask; even your chair is a door . . . Follow me.

Musical Interlude

Reading: Matthew 20: 29-34

Reflection: kite flying



There is a technically better photo of "kite flying" than the one included in the order of service. But I love the photo taken at Knox. I'll tell you why soon.

The artist notes that we don't really fly kites. Kites fly in the wind; we just hold the string. Yes, we enjoy our connection to the kite. We marvel at its flight; we enjoy the wonder of its staying up there. Actually when I was a boy, the only wonder I experienced was the wonder of why my kite wouldn't fly! Some of the non-flying must have been due to my lack of kite-making skills. But this kite here is really well made - decorated with a beautifully executed Hebrew letter "aleph" on it. When you learn the Hebrew alphabet, aleph is the first letter you come across - right at the beginning. It has the singular distinction of not really being a letter. It's more like a holder of space. In Biblical Hebrew, the vowels are dots and dashes that go under the big, block-like consonants. But if your word begins with a vowel (or has two vowels next to each other), then you need something for the vowel to go under - it needs

giving space within the consonants. So there is "aleph" - something that has no sound in itself. That makes aleph something like a breath - a breath that makes room within the Word.



There is much of this kingdom of heaven that the disciple never perceives - perhaps that the disciple is not required to perceive. Not that we're blind, or would enjoy being blind to the kingdom. If Jesus were to ask us what he can do for us, we might indeed ask him to enable us to see - very much the disciple's prayer. Because we know there's much we never see.

And that's why I prefer the photo of "kite flying" that was taken at Knox. It's got two people under it, who are not seeing the kite. They're busy looking at another work altogether - one that's on the ground - on that level we're better designed to see.

Under the wonderful flying that God does, the breathing, the soaring, the bearing up, quite often we don't see much of that vertical stuff. We see only what it's enabling the Teacher to do below - Jesus calling people, enabling them to become disciples - the drawing of beauty from brokenness, the redeeming of time, the feeding of the "people on the way", the opening of the door. A disciple's journey . . .

A moment of quiet.