

Sermon Archive 388

Sunday 15 May, 2022

Knox Church, Ōtautahi, Christchurch

Lessons: Psalm 148

Acts 11: 1-18

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



A million and one Christians (and before the end of this sermon, a million and two) have written modern versions of various psalms. But the big scholarly work about the psalms, and their traditional use in the worship of Israel, was written by Artur Weiser, late of Tübingen. His book on the Psalms, called "The Psalms", isn't a "page-turner", but it's serious and well-respected. Seriously, and in a way to be respected, Weiser makes the point that all but a few of the psalms are really old. They speak from a time when the Jewish faith was still quite raw. So, in Psalm 148, we find a raw expression of Jewish faith maintaining that pretty much every part of creation has a part to play in singing God's praise. Sun, stars, the moon; fire, hail and snow; sovereigns, governors and cows; men, women, children; sea monsters, for goodness sake! It's very much the case in this psalm, that whoever you are, whether you be made of gas and light, or dirt and grit, or innocence or experience, or fantasy or nonsense, you are part of the family of God. There's not a whole lot of discrimination going on, as God allots to everyone (really) a place in the chorus.

Well before the time of Jesus, and certainly cemented strongly by the time of Jesus, it wasn't quite that broad and open. If you have leprosy, there's no place for you in the chorus. If you have damaged genitals, no place for you in the chorus. If you are not Semitic, no place for you in the chorus. If you are menstruating just now, no place for you in the chorus. If you are cursed and hanging on a tree, no place for you in the chorus. Somewhere along the way, as the religion has moved from raw to refined, there's been a seismic shift in who belongs. Does this new positioning of the faith, this posture of some doors closed, represent a refining? A taking more seriously of the sacred task? Well, if you're asking the question from within the refined version of the faith, then you're probably going to think so. We are sorry for our earlier version of the faith. We were doing the best we could, before we discerned that our book wasn't quite serious enough.

-ooOoo-

Two young men from different ends of the country went to Dunedin in the first decade of the Twenty first Century. They went there to attend university. No, no, they don't fall in love. As far as I know, they never met. Their stories end up together because a sociologist interviewed them some years later and put their stories into his book. Both men were gay, and slowly coming out of their closets. In their process of doing that, both came across Presbyterian ministers.

From the story of Neill:

When I finally did manage to come out to the assistant minister, she politely listened and nodded as I told the story, but wasn't sure what the Church's official stance was and thought I should go talk to the minister. I did that, and she too nodded politely and asked me a few questions, and then said, 'I don't know what to do with you. Go and talk to the senior pastor.' So I trotted off to the senior pastor and told him the same story.

I want to be a little generous in my understanding, but the senior pastor had been involved in the discussions in the Presbyterian Church around homosexuality for a number of years, and therefore he felt that he'd done his research. He believed that there were two overall streams of gay people. One stream were born gay, and there was no way of changing them. The other stream were people who'd been made gay because they'd been abused in their younger years. He asked me if I'd been abused as a child, and I said 'No. I had a good upbringing.' And he replied 'Well, you might be suppressing those memories, so we should get you some counselling anyway and see if things change.'

That was not a positive experience, and at that point I knew this was no longer a healthy spiritual place for me. I didn't think I was broken. I didn't think I needed mental help. At no point in my journey had I ever thought of even thinking about changing myself or exploring a 'cure'.

So Neill's experience of Presbyterian community was one where his voice had no place in the chorus.

Brody meanwhile, at the same time and in the same city, had a different experience. Describing another Presbyterian minister, Brody said:

[This man on staff] was a gay man . . . and although we never had a conversation about it I felt fortunate to have him in my life, because for one he was like 'It's Okay to be gay', and for two I saw that God and being gay could be reconciled in such a beautiful way as they were in him. In retrospect, he was the first gay role model that I ever came across. At that point his example didn't instantly fill me with the sense that because it was okay to be gay I could tell everyone. It was more like 'Okay, it's not an abominable sinful thing.'

Brody goes on to talk about where he went from there.

One Presbyterian Church, offering two young people two quite different visions of the people of God - two different Christian anthropologies - two different treatments of whether their voice had a place in the chorus. One door open, the other door closed. If the shift in Jewish religion went from an all-inclusive psalm to a more morally discerning regulation of community practice, and if other faiths can be considered to undergo a similar kind of evolution, then where on that scale did the experiences of Neill and Brody fall? In terms of hearing an authentic, properly developed Christian word, who got it? Neill or Brody?

I can tell you that the person of whom Brody spoke in his interview was me. I can also tell you that, in my experience, whenever the church talks about what to do with Brody and Neill, it is the inclusive part of the church that always is called to account for its aberrant position. It is always presumed that the exclusive position is the acceptable, orthodox view. If we want to include those about whom others have (sometimes unexamined) concerns, then we're the ones who have to do the explaining. Culturally, within the church anyway, we start on the back foot of seeming to have taken a too friendly, not-sufficiently morally serious stance. "Why are you eating with sinners", they ask. And we are the ones who are called to provide an answer.

-ooOoo-

Since leaving his fishing nets, and becoming a disciple, Peter has spent three years in the company of Jesus. It was Peter whom the gospels say was the first one to understand the identity of Jesus, the relevance of Jesus, the meaning of Jesus. He's learned huge amounts about himself, about the disciple's journey. He's learned the claims of grace. He's even had a "go" at walking on the water. But still he remains a creature of the culture around him. Still he observes the food laws his religion has given him. Still his understanding of Israel as the "chosen people" causes him to consider other people "not chosen". Enlightened by time on the road with Jesus, Peter still holds deep prejudices that border on racism. If you're not Jewish, then the word that comes to mind is "unclean".

In what I think is a seminal event in the evolution of the Christian faith, Peter has a vision. The vision comes three times - as if for the first two times it's been batted away, deflected. Three times, because two times was still not enough. A picnic sheet comes down from heaven, covered in food that's unclean. And God says "eat it".

Finally, yielding slowly to what he realises the vision is saying to him, Peter goes to visit the house of an unclean person, only to discover that his own God, the Jewish one, already is at home in that house. In the unclean house, God is

blessing, creating trust, faith and community. And the catch-cry slogan echoing from the three-time vision is "What God has made clean, you must not call profane".

I call this a seminal moment, because it represents a huge departure for a first-generation disciple from the kind of moral values and social discernment that has formed him. About various people, the culture has said "no"; but God now is saying "yes". This is to be a flag to all people of Christian Faith as we examine in our own generation what our culture maintains is clean or profane, or acceptable or not acceptable. We're all grown in particular ways to exclude and judge. This story calls us to be brave enough, as Peter was, to let some of the old prejudices go - and to find God already blessing the houses we'd always felt it proper to avoid.

If we learn to let go, as Peter did, then maybe we'd even come up for air in a place where a "psalm for everybody" is being reconstructed.

I said that a million and two Christians had probably had a go at writing a modern psalm. Well, following these reflections, and plugging in a few modern equivalents to the old psalm's template, here's what I came up with.

Praise God, you messengers, TVNZ and Al Jazeera.

Praise God you life-giving dying ball of hydrogen in the sky.

Praise God, you melting icebergs and rising sea levels.

Praise God, Dolly the sheep, Peppa the Pig and the long-lamented Haast Eagle.

Praise God, you taniwha in our river bends.

Praise God, you loved and fading Queen.

Praise God, Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Vladimir Putin.

Praise God, Carlos Alvarez Garfia and Parris Goebel,

Judy Dench and Iain McKellen.

Praise God Neill and Brody.

Praise God, the whole lot of you;

bring your voice to the chorus - for it is God who made you.

"He has exalted the horn of his people,
a praise for all his saints,
for the children of Israel, the people that is near to him.
Hallelujah.

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