

Sermon Archive 389

Sunday 22 May, 2022

Knox Church, Ōtautahi, Christchurch

Lessons: Acts 16: 1-15

Revelation 21:10, 22 - 22:5

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Dear Diary; you know I've never had any pretensions that the stuff we're sharing will be timeless or useful. The official version's being written by Luke - who's got a much better eye for what matters. You and I are just an anonymous "we" - part of that "first person plural" Luke uses sometimes. We're just the wonderings of someone on the way - mind you, on the way through quite an interesting point in time. Here we go.

-ooOoo-

Dear Dairy; today I've found myself feeling a bit sorry for Timothy. I've only just met him, but I feel sorry for him. We'd been told that he was a talented young man - and he is. His mother's a Jewish woman who "got" the gospel. His father's a Greek. Not sure I know anything about him really, other than that he's a Greek. I'm aware that that's kind of a racist way of describing him. Who was the woman you met at the supermarket? - O, she was Russian. O, she was Eurasian. I mean you **can** describe people by their race - providing you're aware it's saying something about how you see the world - how your first-response is focussed. Anyway, all we really heard was that Timothy's father was Greek. Might be an advantage, I suppose, as we travel around this part of the world. Trouble is that many of the people we've ended up talking to have been Jewish people camping in little enclaves in the Greek commercial world. And you know - the Jews and the Greeks: not entirely a happy combination. So Paul sort of reckoned that Timothy should be kind of de-Greeked - made more Jewish. That's why I feel sorry for Timothy. Seems like rather too great a concession for him to be required to make. That's why I feel sad for him. And it's also why I feel sad for more than him. I feel sad for the **movement**. Surely we should be able to "speak Jesus" without having to buy into ideas about whether Greeks can speak to Jews, or Jews to Greeks. Maybe Paul was just being a pragmatist - dealing with one distraction by removing it, for the greater good of focussing on what really matters.

Anyway, dear Diary; feeling a bit compromised, and a lot sorry for Timothy, those are my thoughts today.

-ooOoo-

Dear Diary; today we've done some more of what we call "going from town to town". And pretty much everywhere we go, we come across that same old question: how much of the old religion is still required. And I find myself wondering whether our treatment of Timothy hasn't compromised our position on that - because what we **want** to say is "not much". The old religion doesn't bind us. But there we've got Timothy, of whom we required a lot - to be more Jewish in his flesh - even though half of him's Greek. Anyway . . .

We've found ourselves, in these conversations about what's required, talking about that big meeting we had in Jerusalem - when all the apostles and elders talked it through. Why did we talk it through? Because even there in Jerusalem, this bloody question kept coming up. We weren't the only ones finding it on our travels. It seemed to be everywhere. So in one bold meeting, we tried to agree on a position. We came up with "Don't eat food sacrificed to idols, and don't fornicate". (Yes, they're the two things we chose.)

I don't think until now, Diary, that I have ever felt responsible for a position taken by the Church (idols and fornication). I don't think before I've ever had to toe a party line - one I think is an overreaction. I think I'm learning that we do belong to a tradition, and that sometimes that belonging brings with it an individual responsibility to a communal spirit. I'm not sure; I'm still working that out - as maybe Timothy is - as he thinks about his being Greek in a world that wants him to be Jewish. I actually don't know. Private conviction within public proclamation . . .

But as we travel about, it's like the faith is growing. Funny day!

-ooOoo-

Dear Diary; today I'm thinking about the places we **haven't** been, and the things we **haven't** chosen to do. We've been travelling through the region of Phrygia and Galatia. And it would have made perfect sense for us, while here, to pop down into Asia. But we didn't; and the reason we're giving is that the Holy Spirit forbids sit. The same's true of Bithynia. We could've gone there, and maybe some of us thought we should; but the official reason for not, was that the Spirit of Jesus did not allow us.

This plays with my brain. I can't quite work out why God wouldn't want us to visit certain places.

Wiser souls in the family remind me that I'll never be able to understand why God might or might not **will** certain things. They tell me to stop pushing, and be humbler before the inscrutable plan. And maybe they'll be right. Or maybe I'll be right that we need to be careful saying our own decisions are not our own. I remember once listening to someone who'd made a bad decision about a particular attitude to someone else (it's that Greek / Jew thing again, that clean / unclean thing). And he basically said, to defend his own position, that he was just being obedient to the Word of God. I felt his decision was based more honestly actually on something other than the Word of God (on a prejudice). I thought his recourse to obedience was spiritually lazy. Blaming God for something that was his spiritual responsibility.

But there it is. We didn't go to Asia. And we didn't go to Bithynia. And we called it the will of God.

-ooOoo-

Dear Diary; Paul had a vision last night - maybe a dream. But in our culture the young men have visions and the old men have dreams - so out of tact for Paul (who can be a bit insecure, you know), I'll just go with our description of Paul having a "vision". The important thing was that the vision was about Macedonia and a sense of urgency. "Come over and help us", it said - almost like there was an emergency.

And I really liked that. It wasn't another place **not** to go to. It was a place that was calling. There seemed, to me, to be something of the spirit of Christ in it - being the Saviour - racing to save. We contracted a boat, and we sailed full steam ahead, in the straightest course we could set. And when we reached the coast, it was like some huge momentum pushed us along - past Samothrace, past Neapolis. There was a huge sense of not knowing exactly where we were going, but knowing that we'd know when we got there. It was exhilarating: faith as a movement in a moment; faith as a going forward; faith as arriving in a new place full of openness to what might happen next! I wonder what we'll do here.

-ooOoo-

Dear Diary; Philippi's what they call a "leading city". Rome's here. Greece is here. Wealth and commerce are here. Now **we're** here. On the Sabbath we went down to the river, and found a group of women.

Lydia's a Greek name. Well, it's **Philippi**, so of course it's Greek. Did you know that Timothy's half Greek? Might be a useful connection down here by the river. (Poor Timothy.)

It was clear from the start, from something she was projecting, that Lydia was a person whose heart had been opened. Open, eager - a listening person.

When it turned out that she was a woman of purple cloth - top end textiles and high fashion, that was a bonus. It did strike me as strange though, that we'd come to Macedonia with a sense of people being in need, and we'd ended up finding a woman steeped in wealth. Her material need was not requiring our help. Ha! Is there maybe some other kind of need we should have kept in mind? Values re-adjustment! Call back to our central calling, perhaps?

She prevailed upon us to stay a while. So we did. It became one of those places where people were baptised, and new belonging was experienced. At the far end of a wild blue journey, well into Greek territory, community in Jesus was found. Greek territory? Did I tell you that Timothy's Greek? He's one of us, and he's Greek. How about that!

-ooOoo-

Dear Diary. It's just as well that Luke's writing the official version - because if you only had access to our conversation, then it would all seem too fragile and racist, too absurd and human to be helpful. Unless of course, it's within the fragile, absurd and human, that we believe the realm of God, the city of faith, is to be built.

-ooOoo-

By the river, at the far end of a crazy journey, the city has no temple, for it's temple is the Lord and the Lamb. They have no need of sun or moon to shine on them, for the glory of God is their light. By the river, as new community is found (Timothy, Paul, Lydia and us), there's a tree of life, the leaves of which are for the healing of the nations. We see the face of God.

Could it be that it is in the frail, human and absurd, that it is on the journey of those who hope and doubt, and ask ridiculous things of Timothy (did I tell you his father was Greek) that the new city of God is being built.

We keep a moment of quiet.

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