

Sermon Archive 453

Sunday 17 September, 2023

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Lesson: Matthew 18: 21-35

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



At the beginning of the movie "Falling Down", we find a character called Bill, trying, it would seem, to get to work (he's got his briefcase), but being instead trapped in a traffic jam on a congested motorway.

He's white, apparently middle class, apparently conservative. He wears old-fashioned glasses, a tie, and has a series of ballpoint pens pinned nicely in the left breast pocket of his short-sleeved business shirt - ready for work, if there is any work . . .

In the car, it's hot; it's noisy; the air conditioning isn't working and there's a fly in the car, insisting on landing on his neck. There are fighting children in the bus next door; a Garfield cat toy in the rear window of the car in front of him has a sign on it, saying "eat shit ". Other bumper stickers in the scene tell Bill various things, including "Jesus - he died for our sins". Others in convertibles are on their early mobile phones trying to get their powerful friends to fix the traffic. And then the fly!

Just as it seems the breaking point has come, Bill quickly undoes his seatbelt, opens the door and exits the vehicle. From a nearby vehicle, an angry man shouts at him "hey, where do you think you're going". Bill shouts to him "I'm going home". The rest of the film follows Bill's attempts simply to go home. He's on foot, briefcase in his hand, walking across Los Angeles - city of the angels!

The first angel Bill meets is the owner of a dairy. Bill is looking to change a bank note into coins so he can use in a public phone box. The owner of the dairy says he doesn't provide change without a purchase. Bill purchases a coke, which doesn't allow him enough change for a phone call. When Bill asks him whether he might make an exception, the owner picks up the baseball bat he hides behind the counter. The ensuing altercation results in Bill leaving the shop with a baseball bat in his hand and a lot of broken glass in the shop.

On his next stretch along the way home, he sits on a grassy knoll to have a rest. He is approached by some knife-carrying teenagers who demand that he give them his briefcase. We discover later in the movie that the only thing in Bill's

briefcase is his lunch. It contains nothing of value, but at this point Bill is just annoyed. Why should they think that they can take what doesn't belong to them. Since he has a baseball bat, he uses it. He leaves this scene with a baseball bat and a couple of knives.

You can see the pattern that is developing here. Following an interaction at a fast food outlet where he wants one particular thing from the menu, but is told at one minute past eleven that the breakfast menu isn't available and he has to eat something else, he acquires a gun. Walking through the city of angels, a series of unwanted interactions leave him progressively more frustrated and weaponised. By the end of the movie he is a very angry man with a huge capacity to inflict damage on the world. He only wanted to go home. The environment through which he travelled, though, has created a monster. In the final scene Bill asks "how did this happen?" How did Bill become the bad guy?

-ooOoo-

Most of us are familiar, I guess, with frustrations, and the unfriendliness of the world. Most of us know what it's like to become angry - and in anger, to mirror the destructive behaviour that made us angry. And those who study world conflict can tell you about cycles of escalation, and all the sorts of things that make conflicts more intense and intractable. When you kill **my** brother, I'm more likely to kill **your** brother. When you use cluster bombs, I'm more likely to deploy my chemicals. And as I become more cynical about your humanity, I'm more likely to treat you in ways that will make you act in inhuman ways. Mirroring is what contributes to the city of angels' turning Bill into a monster.

-ooOoo-

Here's an update on the car situation. When the car was stolen for the second time in eight days, it seemed to have disappeared properly that time. With each passing day it wasn't recovered, I formed the view that it was unsafely in a warehouse somewhere, being dismantled for parts. That actually suited me quite well, since I knew the process of getting it fixed and sold was going to take a couple of months. I sort of rejoiced that this time, it had been stolen by professionals. On the seventh day, I bought a new car. On the eighth day I rang the insurance company to organise the pay-out on the car that now officially was lost.

Doing due diligence, the nice man at the insurance company informed me that the car was not on the police list of stolen vehicles. Was I sure that I had reported it stolen. I was, and had the file number to prove it. I rang the

police to sort out the glitch. The police told me that the car had been found the day after it had been stolen, but that they had kind of forgotten to tell me. It had been towed to a car yard, where it had been processed by the forensics team, who kind of forgot to tell me. The results of the examination were given to another group who removed my car from the list of stolen vehicles (because now it had been found and processed), but also kind of forgot to tell me. So now I am paying interest on the bridging loan not for the couple of days I had planned, but probably for a couple of months.

The annoying thing is that the car wasn't stolen by professionals. It was found not just the next day, but also just around the corner. It's those lovely children at work again.

I had worked out what I might say to any of them I might have the pleasure eventually of meeting at a restorative justice conference. I decided I wanted them to speak their name. I then would say "I curse your name. Whenever you speak it, you will experience shame. Whenever your people hear it, they will know disappointment. I curse your name. I curse it."

Bill becomes the bad guy. The question is a proper one: in the city of angels, how did this happen?

-ooOoo-

Jesus said that unless we learn to forgive, from the heart, there is no hope for the world.

Having spent time with Jesus, Peter reckons that he is beginning to cotton on to the general theme of his message. He knows that forgiveness is part of what Jesus is talking about, maybe a large part. There's something in the way he puts his question to Jesus, that shows he's keen to show that he understands. Forgiveness is so important that he's willing to forgive the one who wrongs him even seven times. Jesus tells Peter, that even in his seven-time-forgiving mode, he's still not even close. **Seventy** seven is more like it, he says - **and** from the heart.

Then he tells his parable of the complete folly of the person who knows what forgiveness is, and what it means, and how it feels - but doesn't feel moved, himself, to forgive others. The figure of the forgiven person who can't forgive is one of the most unattractive figures in Jesus' story book. His attitude causes not only the fellow servants in the story to be "greatly distressed", and to dob him in. It causes **us** to **despise** him.

But then, I guess we need to be careful about despising the unforgiving, because we're living in the city of angels and some of us are having fantasies about cursing other people.

It's almost as if Jesus is telling us that it's only if everyone is forgiving and being forgiven that there is hope for the city. Again and again, he suggests, even we who live in the presence of the teaching and forgiving Christ, vastly underestimate the importance of forgiveness. Have patience on us, we say, and we will pay God what God is due . . . our treatment of one another is the paying of what God is due . . . and while patience is being extended, forgiveness becomes the pattern, not the exception. Forgiveness becomes contagious.

-ooOoo-

Here's a thought experiment. There is a community, somewhere inside the city of angels, that believes in forgiveness. So it discharges the debts it is owed. Those who no longer are in the power of debt are amazed. Perhaps they are enabled then themselves to live generously, forgiving the debts of even more others. Slowly the world becomes less angry, more open and hopeful. Eventually, no one is born into anger or damage. And one day, when someone asks "is this the new creation?", some of us find ourselves wanting to say, "yes, we think it probably is - wow, how did **that** happen? But, thanks be to God".

I said it was a thought experiment, didn't it? It won't happen, of course. So long as Peter is still thinking in terms of "seven", rather than Jesus' ridiculous seventy seven, it's not going to happen. And we kind of become comfortable with the idea that it won't happen - because that's our lingua franca in the city of angels - that the destructive environment forms the destructive individual.

But what **if**, again, as in the thought experiment, a new culture were to begin forming people. What if we heard a parable about the high importance of forgiving from the heart. What if we lived in **that** city for a while?

Have patience with us, O God, and tell us your story. Let us **hear** it.

We keep a moment of quiet.

The Knox Church website is at: <http://www.knoxchurch.co.nz.html> . Sermons are to be found under News / Sermons.