

## Sermon Archive 454

Sunday 24 September, 2023

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Readings: Psalm 145: 1-8

Matthew 20: 1-16

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



On 17th of September 2023, Matthew preached a sermon. Stripped down to its bare basics, the sermon went something like this: we fall into seeing the world in particular ways - with its power dynamics, its logic, its expected outcomes - generally unquestioned. Some of the outcomes of our seeing the world in an unquestioned way aren't great, you know - but the general pattern of how things work kind of makes sense, we get used to it - so we go along with it. A case in point, illustrated through the story of Bill, the Everyman, becoming a monster as he travels through the city of angels - was the power of the violent environment to form violent individuals within itself. We let the culture of violence form our world - we accept the formative power of anger. That's just how things are. Next to this, he put a parable of Jesus - a story about the creative power of forgiveness. What if, he asked, we let another culture take root in the world - as Jesus had let it take root in *his*? What if we gave ourselves to be formed not by revenge, but by forgiveness? What might grow if we gave ourselves to another way of being in the world? A parable invited us to a different analysis of our helplessness within the world's lessons in violence. The power of the parable to suggest a better way . . .

It was an acceptable sermon.

After church on that same day, Matthew told Don that he wasn't too sure how next week's sermon (another parable) would come together. Not because he had no ideas about the next parable - the next parable was a doozie! The problem was that his typing speed just now was much reduced, and he was quite sure that before each idea-representing sentence had been typed, the idea it was seeking to express would have been forgotten. Mind too fast, fingers too slow! Don had a great idea. Had Matthew thought of using his computer's dictation facility? Click the microphone icon, speak clearly at the computer, and let *it* turn the sounds

into text. No need for fingers! Matthew was familiar with this facility, and had found it a bit inaccurate. Lots of text-mending had needed to be involved. Deciding to give dictation mode a go, he had low expectations. He suspected the correction process likely required to get from first utterance to acceptable script, would entail as much slow typing as just typing from the start. Also, he realised that he never just has an idea, then perfectly expresses it in words straight from the mouth. As he works on the words, choosing the best ones refines the idea. Word and idea have a dialogical relationship - it's never a one way dictation.

The point of the previous sermon (17 September) was that other ways of operating can liberate us. Sometimes we just need a parable of Jesus to dislodge us from our debilitating belief that things can only be the way they already are, and we must work the way we already do.

At the end of this sermon, I will tell you how much of it was written using dictation mode.

-ooOoo-

Quite late in the day, 5:00pm, a vineyard owner goes into the marketplace, where he finds a group of people standing around idly. Not much is happening; even less is being achieved. So he asks them "why are you here?" And they say "well, you know, um, nobody has hired us".

They're there, of course, because this probably is the place where they have the greatest chance of finding work. It's the established practice of their world that workers go there to get jobs, and job-providers go there to find workers. It's a practical convention. In the main it works pretty well. Well, having said that it works pretty well, it hasn't today for this group. The day has come, the day almost has gone, and nobody has given them an opportunity. We could suggest to them, of course, that maybe this wasn't the best strategy. Maybe they could have bought a guitar, taken guitar lessons and done some busking. Then at least they'd have avoided attracting the judgment of idleness, and suffering the debilitation of spirit that that tends to bring. **They** might care, then, to respond by pointing out that what little money they have needs to go on food, rather than guitar lessons. We would talk about investment in the future. They will shrug about survival of the current day. And our conversation, based as it is, solely on the principles of using what we have to get what we need, will have got about as far as it will get. (The secret question, hidden in this part of the sermon, is could there be another kind of conversation that

might be had? One that comes from a culture not so oriented by the established principles of the market place?)

In the meantime, they are where they are, because it is the place (the market place) that their way of life accepts their best chances are. It leads them to be idle, and responding to any question about idleness with the seemingly sad truth that today nobody wants them.

The kingdom of God is like someone who hears them say "nobody wants us", then sends them off to the vineyard.

-ooOoo-

Not much later in the day, it's time for the workers to be paid - not just the late arrivals, but also those who were hired early in the day - the people for whom, on the surface anyway, the market place appeared to be working well. The unwanted workers are given a ridiculously generous sum of money. This is perhaps a signal that we're living now in "parable land", since only in parable land would this silly kind of economics apply. The world doesn't work like this. What did we say? "We have our established ways of doing things, and while they're not perfect, they kind of make sense."

Well, not knowing that they're in parable land, the early-hired, long-working workers assume that they are about to be paid an even more ridiculously generous amount - because the logic of their "work and pay" world requires it.

When they are paid a ridiculously generous amount, but not a cent more than the short-working late-comers, they express their dissatisfaction. The owner of the vineyard often forms questions (why are you standing around idle?). His question for **this** group is "why are you upset by my generosity? Aren't you receiving what you were promised?" "Yes, but we are distracted by the undeserving others . . ."

The market place has its rules and expected outcomes. And as we know, the environment forms the individual - with all the individual's attitudes and expectations. But what if another culture is sown - given some permission to form a different way of thinking, operating, being?

Can you imagine a world where our good fortune (our denarius) is enjoyed, rather than ruined because we are distracted by the good fortune of others? Can you imagine a world where jealousy doesn't feed indignation? Can you imagine a world where we're free to notice the sun

in the sky, the leaves on the vines, the deep purple of the grapes, and the conversation of our fellow-workers as we work together, rather than only what we are being paid to do it? I don't know whether this is a communist question or a fascist one. Neither do the vineyard workers probably know. But this is part of the thought experiment hidden in his parable of Jesus. Do we need to be formed only by the prevailing culture of just deserts and jealous response? Do we need to give ourselves obediently to the world's power to form us into jealous people? Or does the kingdom of God call us to explore the world through a different lens?

-ooOoo-

The sermon is coming to its end. Two things will bring it to completion.

The first is a comment about how much of it involved slow, tedious typing, and how much just fell out of my mouth and into the computer's dictation mode. I tried dictating; I really did. But either my old method of typing and thinking, thinking and typing is just the best way, or I'm just set in my ways. I didn't do a lot of dictating. It's hard to know sometimes whether there is a better way to be explored. Maybe it takes time, or the intervention of even more extreme necessity. Maybe if I'd lost my fingers in a lawn mower! When things are "kind of working", we tend to hold onto them. And you know, when I say that, I'm not really talking about sermon-writing. I'm talking about trekking through the city of angels or standing idle in the market place. I'm talking about how we know that the kingdom provides another way, which often is not seized.

The second completing thing for the sermon are some words I can imagine being sung by someone who has left the old world of the market place of entitlement and jealousy, and gone off to live in the generosity of parable land. The closing words are from a psalm we've already read.

*One generation, O God, shall extol your works to another, and declare your mighty acts. They shall celebrate the fame of your abundant goodness, and shall sing aloud of your righteousness. The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*

People of Knox; could that be our song? Could that be the parable land in which we dwell?

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.