

## Sermon Archive 459

Sunday 12 November, 2023

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reading: 1 Thessalonians 4: 13-18

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



### PART ONE.

Kia ora Derek,

I am really pleased to have met you early in 1987 when we started as house masters at the boarding school in Dunedin. In an "early life" time when "how old you were" was more important than now it is, I was three years older than you were. So I was three years "better" than you were - the accumulated wisdom of a twenty three year old!

I think both of us started as house masters with a sense of the house masters being "few" and the boarders being "many". We didn't know, in those days how the tradition of boarding schools across the country allowed for people like us to do whatever we wanted to boys like them. That never crossed our minds, because you and I, though different, were respectful human beings. And our main desire really, was simply not to be eaten for breakfast by great hoards of spirited kids. My approach was to try to be likeable - you know, friendly, amicable - to play to the kinder side of the boys. Yours was to pretend not to care, and to kind of play the grinch. Like I said, we were different.

We **were** different. I was the Protestant child of parents of three from Auckland. You were the orphan child, one of seven siblings in a Catholic family from the Waikato. That difference, I am moved now to say, was a difference that came from our Irish parents' generation and culture. You know, Catholic here, Protestant there - stones thrown in between. What we held in **common**, apart from the friendship we developed through not being eaten for breakfast - was our semi-serious (how serious is seriousness in the early to mid-twenties - both super-serious and not serious at all) - our semi-serious understanding of our being people of church and faith. I was training for ministry, and you were forming ideas about serving God as a doctor and wanting to do Catholic Overseas Volunteer work in the Pacific - which you did.

You were certainly, at that time, my closest friend. And so I was so bloody angry with you when you fell asleep at the wheel on Easter Monday, 1991, and departed this life. You were the first person of my own generation whom I had loved, with

whom I shared faith (although we didn't talk about it - amazing really that we didn't talk), and from whom I then was separated by death.

Well, just so you know, since you were 24 years old, I have turned sixty. I've probably not celebrated many of the things that you might have marked - the birth of children, the turning of wedding anniversaries from paper to cotton to leather . . . Good God, this year you'd have been married for 34 years - well beyond gifts of pearl.

But I've done other things. I've begun to appreciate seasons more, and ambiguity. I've written 459 sermons for some poor community in Christchurch - people of a city I never thought would become my home. I've crashed - but nowhere as spectacularly as you did. I've found a place and a way to be. I've enjoyed arriving at a time in life when I don't care so much about what people think. I've qualified for the national bowel screening programme, whereby I get to scrape some of my poo into an envelope and post it to Auckland. Did you know that the other day someone called me a "koro" of the church? "Koro" - grandfather! I grieve that you didn't get a chance to do with your life what time has allowed me to do with mine. I wonder when you might have sprouted your first grey hairs. I wonder whether you'd have become thinner or fatter. I wonder what names you would have chosen for your children.

You know, Derek, you silly young man, few people listening to sermon 459 are going to be without an experience of this thing that **we** have (you and I) - a sense of deep love for people who've now gone away.

So thank you, Derek. God bless you.

## **PART TWO.**

The earliest Christians were people who saw Jesus as some great hope as they despaired about the state of the world, and decided to walk along with him, as he explored the world. Some were zealots, motivated by politics and the social outrage of being occupied by foreign powers. Some were unsatisfied "keepers of the old faith", who longed for someone to bring depth and spirit (connection) to the old longing. Some were those who didn't yet quite know what was wrong, but heard something in his voice that reassured them. Uniting them (what was wrong?) was a sense that Jesus was going to put things right. In THIS world, amid THIS wrong, yearning for THIS right, Jesus was the key.

When he died, of course, not everything was right. The world still was wrong. But that was OK, because rumour had it that "he was risen; he was risen indeed". We "believe that Jesus died and rose again . . ." so said some of the Christians.

And I guess in that belief that Jesus' work wasn't quite yet finished, because he was alive in the world, and doing things in the world, and bringing the world to

some final crisis that would fix the world, kind of helped them keep the faith that things might yet be put right for all those who'd followed him, believed in him, become his people.

But then a bit of time expired. And some of those who'd been part of the hopeful community, waiting for the work to be finished, died. Once you're dead, separated from those with whom you'd walked the Jesus walk of faith . . . well, for you, have you been lost to the blessing for which we'd all been waiting?

That is the Thessalonian question. What of those who have died? You know, we loved them - they were part of us, part of our hope. But has their being separated from us, who wait for Christ to do that for which our naive belief waited, made them a people who've been lost?

The Thessalonians only ask because they loved them. Because they miss them. Because their understanding of faith brings them to some kind of crisis about whether God makes for them a loving accommodation.

As generation after generation of others joined those who had died, and the balance of the question of "what about the dead" weighed more heavily upon the dead than on the living (Jesus still not has returned), the shape of the question shifted. But its substance remained - on this side of life and death, the substance remained: what about those whom we loved, and whom now we miss?

### **PART THREE.**

Paul wants to write to the Thessalonians, who miss their friends who have died, and who feel that the dead are in danger of missing something huge that is giving of justice and peace and life. (What would you have called your children? When would you have gone grey? Would you have served God as a doctor? Why didn't you have more time to become the older person whom God might have enabled you to be? What might you have done for the healing of the broken world?)

Before all *this*, Paul throws together what he's got. He frames it in a world-view that doesn't translate too well two thousand years later. He talks about the archangel's call and the sound of God's trumpet. He talks about graves opening up and people being drawn into the air. He talks about a schedule of how God is going to embrace people, category by category . . . by category.

And we who hear it so many centuries later, so many generations since more and more people have not been taken up into the air, stumble over how Paul was trying to respond to the people who are concerned that those they've love have not been forgotten by the God who will mend the world.

What would you have called your children? How would you have healed the world? When would you have gone grey? How would we talk now if we met, you a twenty-four year old and me a koro of the church?

Paul's world view, with its schedules and trumpets and archangels shouting out . . . Would this block me to what God might really want to say?

#### **PART FOUR.**

Strip Paul's response to the Thessalonians of the world view, the apocalyptic overlay through which we hear it, and we hear someone saying "don't you worry about those whom you have loved and lost. "We who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will be with the Lord forever". [1 Thessalonians 4: 17]. Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Perhaps the church, listening to a reading from Thessalonians, might focus on angels, trumpets, schedules and what it means to be caught up in the clouds . . . And perhaps we'd be baffled by the strangeness. But you say to us "just, encourage one another with these words". Don't get hung up on trumpets and graves. To you who miss those whom you have loved, to you who fear that they might have fallen beyond how God might bless us now, I say "encourage one another with these words".

#### **PART FIVE.**

Kia ora, again, young Derek. I'm kind of sorry for dragging you into this sermon (459). Maybe you should have been left to rest in peace. The truth is that you were my first friend to die and to leave me affected. The truth is that I have wondered about what you might have done with more life, should it have been your lot.

We had lots of conversations that we might have continued. We had lots of friendship that might have been deepened. I harbour, in my heart, an on-going sense that you were denied a deepening of life that would have been wonderful for you.

But today, I hear scripture say to me "Matthew, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as other do who have no hope . . . No, we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them, to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will be with the Lord forever".

God bless you, Derek. The great cloud of witnesses . . . A moment of quiet.

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