Sermon Archive 494

Sunday 21 July, 2024
Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch
Two Reflections
Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack

KNOX CHURCH
love faith outreach community justice

Reading: Genesis 32: 22-32

Reflection: Who's that fighter?

In last week's service, I read a reflection by Jan Richardson, an American Methodist. It was called "The River of John". I didn't print it (or include it in the Sermon Practice video) in order not to break copyright conditions. But it was a meditation occasioned by the death of John the Baptist. In four sections, Jan wrote about John's birth, and the hope that his parents had for their child. It talked about his devotion, his single-minded concern to be true to his calling. It talked about his dignity in death. And at the end of each section the refrain was used "His name is John". The ringing refrain of the claiming of his name was a reminder that he was no footnote to history, no sideline detail to a story that didn't matter. He was a person. And indeed, in the Hebrew culture, the name is never a label; it's an affirmation - a claiming of a uniqueness. We feel something of this kind of thing at our service for Matariki - when we call out the names of those who have died. It's a speaking in pride of the real people whom we have loved and lost. The name.

All through the night, as Jacob wrestles, fights, struggles against this mysterious "present One" who has entered his camp, part of the struggle is to wrest from the fighter a name. What is your name? Give me your name. I will not cease the struggle until I have your name. I need to know who you are. And to a point it's obvious, isn't it? If someone turns up to wrestle with, us to engage us in something challenging, we'll want to who it is.

Part of the engagement also, though, is for Jacob to answer the question himself: "what is ***your*** name". Jacob's name, of course, means "heel" - the back of the foot. It came from the story of his birth. The second born twin came out of his mother's womb clutching at the heel of his just-older brother, as if he was trying not to come second. Jacob's name is a play on words, suggesting that he's the insecure one who's going to spend his life grabbing at his brother's birthright, his brother's position. Jacob means "over-reacher, supplanter, thief of the blessing". And the name has indeed, to this point, been a good fit. In this

struggle with the "One who is present", Jacob is having to confess who he is. He does this on a night greatly expected to be the night before a great denouement with his brother, who is on the edge of the camp with an army and a whole lot of anger. It's a high-noon at midnight. Having confessed his name (having declared who he is) Jacob will not let go until he knows the name of the One with whom he is struggling. At dawn, as he limps away from the fight, he knows that he has struggled with ***God*** - and God has given him a new name. He comes away from his struggle with God, a new person. Limping, but new.

This is the Hebrew story from which the Christian tradition derives its concept of "struggling with God" - becoming new in our engagement with who God is for us, and what that means in terms of who we, also, are. And the concept is tied up with reclaiming the integrity of our original image - the revealing of the thumb-print of the One who created us for love and for the nurturing of creation. The One who brought out from the chaos a miracle of life and order. The One who said of us and our world "behold, it is very good". To struggle with God is to struggle towards the good, towards the fullness of who we are in God.

Judaism and Christianity are not the only religions, of course, to feature the idea of struggling with God. Islam also has the concept. The famous word for it is "jihad". In its purist form, "jihad" means "struggle". And it stands for the refinement of the person, as the person struggles to comprehend who God is, and who, in the light of that, mortals also are. Jihad's a noble concept, all about the betterment of people on the quest under heaven.

As we know, though, sometimes the concept creeps from its purist form - into something quite else. In its corrupted form it leads to violence. It leads to the dehumanising of the other. It leads large crowds of people to chant together "Death to America". But yeah, I don't know, are words only words? Does it matter that people chant "Death to America" if they don't act in ways that kill? I suppose it depends on whether you think that chanting feeds a culture, and culture always flows into action.

Rather than one sermon today, there are two reflections. And the first one is almost done. What needs to be said before it's over? I think what needs to be said is that communities have to be very careful when they start using the words of struggle, words about the "fight". Because words about the fight can easily move us far from "betterment in God". Easily, they can move us towards being base and violent - quite the opposite of the better selves of whom we might be proud.

In the playgrounds of the schools which I attended as a child, whenever things had gone wrong, and two boys (always the boys) came to blows, trying to beat the snot out of each other, the crowd that quickly formed around it would shout "fight, fight, fight". The shouting was in the "declarative" (there is a fight). But there was also a spirit of the "imperative", (fight, you boys - do it!). Blood noses, black eyes, crying, one if not two limping afterwards. Fight, fight, fight.

From our basest selves, may the almighty and most merciful God defend us.

Music for Reflection: Almighty and everlasting God - Orlando Gibbons

Reading: Acts 7:54 - 8:1

Reflection: Who was that mob?

When you're exploring literature around the Christian theology of death, the death of Stephen often appears. It's noted that Stephen is the first person (in the story anyway) to die following the resurrection of Jesus. People are fond of noticing how Stephen dies with a vision before him of heaven opened, and his dying words are words of surrender to the Christ he knows will receive him. People like to contrast this with the immediately previous death in the story - that of Jesus, where the heavens aren't open (but darkness comes upon the land), and where in Mark's gospel anyway, Jesus' last audible words (the words before the agonising cry) were "why have you forsaken me?"

"See what a difference", the theologians of death say, "a resurrection makes". "Stephen has a good death", they say. I get their point about resurrection, but wouldn't call his a death that's ***good***. Not even though it is noted that a young man called Saul approved of it. No, this death was by a violent mob, throwing stones out of anger, in a frenzy, at a young man whom they had noted, near the beginning of his long speech, had the face of an angel.

The act of killing happened outside the city. And maybe "outside the city" is not just about geographical place. Maybe it's a nod to the idea that this is not happening within any sense of civilization. It's happening in the realm of wild animals in whose nature lies the capacity to kill and eat. Who knows - though I ***am*** inclined to note that this act of killing (covering their ears, shouting loudly, ignoring the face of an angel) all speaks to the base nature in action.

What is quite remarkable is that this deed of violence was done by a group convened by the High Priest to discern the will of God and keep order in the Faith. This frenzied and wild attack on an innocent person was done by those who five seconds beforehand had been a court of law.

You would think, wouldn't you, or would have hoped, that the official organs of government would have done better. They didn't, and now the church has this responsibility to reflect on broken standards of responsible people and governing institutions. We do, I think, expect better from those who would administer order than to shout "fight, fight, fight".

Like I said in the first reflection, maybe words are only words. Does it matter if people chant "Death to America", providing they don't act in ways that kill? I suppose it depends on whether you think that chanting feeds a culture, and culture always flows into action. We expect more of anyone, let alone those who would lead. Blood noses, black eyes, crying, one if not two limping afterwards.

And talking of those who limp afterwards, just a wee note on the young man Saul, who saw religious administration throwing stones at Stephen, and approved: for the rest of his life, Saul (now with the new name "Paul" - was he a new person) spent the rest of his life confessing his wrong, and being troubled by a thorn in his flesh. I wonder if his memory of Stephen being bashed to death mightn't indeed have felt like a thorn in his flesh. Does one ever truly leave behind that kind of experience? Maybe only with a lot of work and weeping, and vision of a God who has power to forgive . . .

How, then, to end these reflections? Maybe by revisiting an anthem text:

From our basest selves,

Almighty and everlasting God
Mercifully look upon our infirmities
And in all our dangers and necessities
Stretch forth thy right hand to help and defend us
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.