

Sermon Archive 496

Sunday 4 August, 2024

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reflections for Peace Sunday

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Identifier - CB47B/686. Registration District - Canterbury. Issued 23 February 2000. Estate - fee simple. Area 333 square metres more or less. Registered owner - Matthew Edward Jack.

When I moved into this property in June of 2021, it felt great. Having lived in some lovely houses and apartments provided by various parishes, at last I was under my own roof, standing on my own land (well mine and the nice people from the ANZ bank). From the first night in my house, it felt like "home", and I liked it.

Immediately before I bought it, it belonged to a young couple (with a child or two I think). They came to sell it, again "I think", because there were some employment issues that resulted in some financial issues.

Immediately before them, it was the home to the mother of the woman in the young couple - who now works in a shop in the Northlands Mall. She had occupied it since the land had been subdivided from the back garden of the long section on the corner. I'm not sure how long that big garden had been there, but probably quite a long time.

All the streets in the area around my house are named after people and places related to Mary and William Horner, who worked the land, planting among other things, potatoes. Prior to the Horners, there was John Thomas Matson, who sold it to the Horners in 1871 to buy a bigger plot of land up in Bishopdale where he could run ostriches - apparently.

Prior to all of this, the land upon which my house stands was part of the Papanui Bush, a beautiful stretch of native plants, abounding with Totara. There was, in the neighbourhood, the song of the korimako, the bell bird. There were wētā under the fallen logs, and kina (fresh water eels) in the streams. Pretty much all of it was clear-felled to provide timber to build the buildings of the new city of Christchurch. The felling of the bush was possible because the land had been "purchased" from Ngāi Tahu in 1848, as part of what's become known as "Kemp's Purchase". Tacy Kemp organised the purchase on behalf of the infamous New Zealand Company. It's said that he didn't survey the land

properly (well, at all really), so had no detail about the edges of what he'd purchased. And so also he had nothing to guide him in keeping the promise he'd made to allocate an agreed proportion to provide land for Māori Reserves. It's also said that his negotiations (way out at Akaroa) took only a few days, so it was likely that local chiefs had no idea by the end of the lightning-quick meeting that their land had actually been sold. Kemp's purchase, even at the time was considered a classic of "shonky work".

Land. That thing upon which we stand, and that makes us feel we are at home. Land - used by different people at different times for different purposes. Land - which will outlast any living thing upon it. Land - over which battles are fought and blood is spilled. Land - that brings smiles, anger and tears. I own my land - so I'm told. The **longer story** of my house and garden, though, would caution me not to feel too arrogant about my status as "Lord of the Manor".

While we are talking about land, I suppose we need to acknowledge that two of the world's most awful military conflicts, Gaza and Ukraine, on the surface are about territory. In both cases, it's not so much about whether the border between the parties to the conflict is in the right place, but more about whether there ought to be a border at all. Maybe, in Ukraine, Russia would be happy to stop the war if it had a nice wide part of Ukraine so it has ease of access to the Black Sea - but more likely, the war would continue after that access had been acquired, since the party line is that Ukraine is really Russian. Similarly in Gaza, since Israel doesn't believe in two states - and the whole conflict's happening within the old understanding that God has given the land to Israel. Is land collateral damage? Is it the proof of the National narrative? Is it resources to be plundered? Is it the falling silent of the korimako song? Is it just somewhere to grow vegetables? Land is complicated.

Here's a story about a land dispute:

A Reading: 1 Kings 21: 1-19

Way back, before this story of Naboth, Ahab and Jezebel, there was a conversation between God and Samuel the prophet. Samuel had said to his God that he was hurt, since the people were calling to be ruled by a King. Samuel felt like this was a rejection of the work he had done in leading the people as a prophet. You **would** feel hurt, I guess, if you'd been doing your best within the model of leadership you'd grown up in, and suddenly everyone else wants not only a different model, but a different person. Samuel's God says to him "Don't worry Samuel; they not really rejecting you; they're rejecting me". God goes on to say "you go and find them a king - give them what they're asking for. And then be to them a faithful prophet as they learn to be more careful about what they wish for. For kings are going to be a bad experience

for them. The kings will send them to war. They'll put them to hard labour. They'll steal their vineyards and orchards - they'll steal their vineyards . . .

God encouraged the prophet, way back then, not to expect great things from this new form of government - because the new form of government will lose connection with the principles of honour and justice. It will fail to defend or protect the vulnerable ones. It will steal the vineyard.

As something of a sad fulfilment of that prediction, then, we come to the matter of Naboth and his vineyard. It's a piece of land he's inherited from his ancestors, and which he holds in trust for his descendants. And he's using it to produce grapes. Interestingly, his neighbour the king wants to use the land for growing vegetables. Richard Nelson, Associate Professor of Old Testament at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Gettysburg, notes Deuteronomy 11:10 - God's description for the Exodus people concerning the promised land: *"For the land that you are about to enter to occupy is not like the land of Egypt, from which you have come, where you sow your seed and irrigate by foot like a vegetable garden."* He notes also the frequent use of the image of the nation as being a vineyard which is tended by God.

He wonders whether a nuanced Hebrew audience would hear Ahab's plan to turn a vineyard into a vegetable garden as some "aha moment for understanding a clash of cultures and value systems" - Ahab's plans being a perfect metaphor for the abandonment of the principles of Yahweh. Take an image of our hope and turn it into something that speaks of the place of our slavery. I'm not sure, but I like that idea - Hebrew nuances that we'd normally miss.

Certainly, what Ahab and Jezebel end up doing *is* a complete abandonment of God's concern for the poor and the vulnerable. It *is* a supreme travesty of justice. Greed. Refusing to accept a perfectly legitimate "no" to an offer. Sulking. The finding of scoundrels to trump up false accusations. People following orders they must know are wrong. The killing of the owner and the seizing of the land. The writer of 1 Kings deploys no cushioning of the truth, no pulling of punches. The story is written with a brutal clarity that exposes a dreadful truth. Even as the news is reported to Jezebel, who's ordered the execution, there's no subtlety - no "operation vineyard has been completed". They just say to her "Naboth has been stoned; he is dead".

Scholars of Hebrew inheritance practices note that if Naboth is dead, then his children would inherit, so, for Ahab's land-grab to work, maybe Naboth's children also would have needed to have been killed. Indeed, much later in 2 Kings 9, it's reported indeed that they had been - a family massacre, for a piece of land. One family probably doesn't qualify as "genocide".

Nevertheless, this all was commanded from the palace - by those who, in God's name, were meant to be protecting the people. Land causes people to do the most mana-destructive things. Let's see Ahab try to hold his head up high.

Entering the story comes Elijah, the prophet of God. Remember the prophets? Those who like Samuel had always doubted that this particular model of governance would work? How ever it's perceived as ending up working in the world of Ahab, Samuel's become aware of what's happened. Maybe he'd stumbled upon the abandoned, dog-shredded carcass of someone who looked like he might once have been Naboth. Or maybe God whispered the truth in his ear. Either way, he goes directly to the King, declares that the truth has been exposed. He denounces the killing and the stealing. He declares a divine restoring of judicial balance - "as you have killed, so shall you be killed". Is that truth spoken to power? It's certainly scary stuff - and something for the church to process **carefully** as we explore judgment and mercy, and what kind of a role we think is ours to play in current matters of land-grab and government sanctioned killing.

It is Peace Sunday, 2024. Where do we go from here?

Well, this owner of a piece of property in Papanui feels he might need at least to become more aware of how the Papanui bush became what it is today. Someone said once that to refuse to learn about anything that happened before your birth is to remain ever a child. The argument is that whatever position you take on land in any country, you need to do your best to come to your position by engaging with the facts of history. And changing hats from my home-owning one to my Christian one, this inheritor of a Faith that grew out of the faith of the people of Israel, I also need to take an informed look at what's going on in Gaza. And similarly, with my hat of citizenship in the wider world, I need at least to be informed about why Ahab's likeness is trying to seize Ukraine. The one thing that Elijah, God's faithful prophet, does in the story of Naboth is speak the truth about what has happened. That requires no small amount of courage - but it also requires a diligent enquiry about what **is** true - what is the true nature of Ahab's act.

Does that sound daunting? It should. Indeed, it may be that making peace (which so often depends on seeking truth then justice) is not a simple matter. Perhaps peace will not break out **this** week. **This** week, maybe we just watch the spaces where we feel Ahab is working - and watch them with the prophet's eye. I wonder if we're up for that . . . We keep a moment of quiet.

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