

Sermon Archive 497

Sunday 11 August, 2024

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reading: 2 Samuel 18: 5-9, 15, 31-33

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



My mother did not enjoy the fact that she had two sons, both of whom rode motorcycles. She'd ridden pillion passenger in the olden days when she and Dad were "courting", and knew how easily the noisy old machine could slip on the gravel. As a radiographer, she'd taken x-rays of thousands of broken bones. The same broken bone experience caused her to make sure that neither of her boys, as teenagers owned a skateboard. But the control over your son's choices when he's twelve years old don't extend to when he's in his twenties. If he's going to ride a motorcycle as a foolish young adult, then that's what he's going to do.

When aged forty two, and presented with a quote from an Auckland-based removalist firm for moving my bike to my new home in Sydney, I decided to sell the bike and buy another one when I arrived there. Finding the bike market in Sydney full of really overly-inflated prices, I deferred the purchase of a new death machine, and decided I'd buy one later - when I was rich. With every month passing, and riches still not materialising, a lightness of being made a home in my mother's demeanour. While she now needed to worry about how her second-born was faring in a new country, in a difficult parish setting, she no longer had to worry that I might crash and die. I think that parents do want their children to be safe - they want their children to live. It's just that living sometimes means negotiating the dangers.

-ooOoo-

The American philosopher / theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff (who was the international examiner of my doctoral thesis) published one book much shorter than the usual big, heavy ones which made him famous. It was a quiet little work called "Lament for a Son". It was a series of reflections he wrote following the death of his 25 year old son, Eric. Eric had died in a mountain climbing accident in Austria. One of the reflections begins with

the question "why did he do it?" It's not so much the Ed Hillary question, the answer to which is "because it was there". The question was expressing that totally merciless mind-game "what if just one little thing had been different, then maybe the tragedy could have been avoided". The placement of the foot here, rather than there. The tiny lapse of concentration caused by a pleasant or random thought. If the dice had landed on four, rather than five.

Nicholas asks "why did he go climbing that day?" He then writes:

"[Eric] was lured by the exhilaration of meeting head-on the intellectual and physical challenge of climbing. Perhaps in nothing else are mind and body so joined in being taxed. And he was gripped by the awesome sublimity of the mountains: not some 3 foot by five foot two dimensional beauty on which we focus our attention, but a beauty all-encompassing, unavoidable. Beauty pure from the hand of God, untouched by human hand. And deepest, perhaps, climbing for him was a spiritual experience. To go into the mountains was to face God.

*Challenge, sublimity, purity, spirituality - and mingled with these, **menace** . . . How insipid it would be if every misstep, every slip of the hand, meant no more than a five foot drop into an Alpine meadow. The menace is essential to the exhilaration of achievement . . . So I know why he went. His deepest self drew him there, a self his mother and I helped to shape. [From us] he had learned of challenge, of delight, of God. Something of us was inching its way up that mountain on that brilliant Saturday in June. Something of us slid down, bones crushed. But the question keeps asking itself: "why did he do it?"*

The parent fears for the safety of the child. The parent also realises that the child is climbing because it has been taught by the parent to climb. They live in the world that we have helped create. They live as the people we have helped them become. That's the thought that stays with Nicholas Woltersdorff, Eric's father.

-ooOoo-

Did I mention that the world is a dangerous place? It's a very dangerous place for King David of Israel. Not only are there trees that you can be caught up in. Not only are there hairstyles beyond the control of a hair-net. Not only are there gangs of armour-bearers sweeping across the

fields. Indeed, not only all of this, but the region is at war. There are factions. There are enemies. There is a general acceptance that this is a time to kill or be killed. And David knows that his son is out there, surrounded by the danger. Now David and his son are not at peace. Absalom is actually fighting against David's people. There's all manner of tension and really screwed up history between them. But push comes to shove - Absalom is David's son, so what's David going to do? Well, this part of the story starts with David giving his people clear instructions. Should they come across Absalom in the battle, they're to remember who he is, how his father loves him, and they're to hold back the sword. Though the battle might spread over the face of all the country, across the plains, through the woods, "deal gently with Absalom", says David. And we are told that all the people heard these orders being given.

I wonder how these instructions are making you feel. Part of how I feel is informed by a feeling that David's in a position of amazing privilege. Mr and Mrs Smith have no way of making their son safe in the battle - because they're not royal. You might even note that Mr and Mrs Smith didn't cause the bloody war - the way that David's family did. You might even remember the earlier war story when David sent Uriah, one of his soldiers, into a situation of certain death just because he could - because he was a king and Uriah was a commoner whose wife Bathsheba, David had stolen and raped. What right does this killer of other soldiers in his ranks have to protect a rebel soldier, Absalom, his son?

Or, I don't know; is this just a father doing whatever he can to protect his son as the son rides his bike too fast? Could it be a bit of both - wrong and understandable?

-ooOoo-

David learns quite quickly that the giving of clear instructions to safeguard the family doesn't work in a situation of chaos. It almost appears that you can't create a world of disorder, then hope that order be observed. If you make it chaotic, it's chaotic - and chaos does what chaos does.

I see in Nicholas's lament for his son, an awareness that Eric went climbing because he had been shaped as a person by his mother and father. I wonder if King David ever considered that his son died in a world

that had been formed by his own violence (David's violence) - the violence of the fathers. David's obviously deeply moved: "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom. Would that I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!" But I wonder whether David's grief ever moved him to rule his world in a way that made for peace, rather than for chaos and war - a way that gives rise to poets, rather than to soldiers . . .

And I wonder what kind of a world people of faith (faith inherited in the line of David - didn't David have quite a famous descendent?) - I wonder what kind of world they might be dared to build. Build a better world . . .

Hear the Word of God.

Ephesians 4:25 - 5:2

It strikes me that the people of Ephesus, to whom that letter was written, were in the process of forming a new kind of world. Already they have engaged with the reality of a young man dying violently in an unjust struggle. The Lamb of God whom they follow already has shown forth the reality of how dangerous a place the world is. Absalom dangles in a tree, and Jesus hangs on a cross. So the Ephesians know what chaos does. But now they are being called to build a new way of living that grows out of his risen life - out of God's "no" to the violence. They are to do good work with their own hands, so they something good to share with the needy. They are to choose words that build others up. They are to be kind, tender-hearted. And they're never to let the sun go down on anger - no room for the devil in this new world.

While they still have so much work to do (as do we who follow them), it's not like they're without a vision. They know the shape of how they're called to live. They know it, because they've seen it already lived. "Therefore", the letter tells them, "be imitators of God, and walk in love".

In a chamber above a gate, a father weeps "my son, my son". In the city of Ephesus, a new vision moves a people to live as imitators of God. A lament or a hope? A regret or a prayer? A death or a life?

We keep a moment of quiet.

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