

## Sermon Archive 506

Sunday 27 October, 2024

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reading: Hebrews 7: 23-28

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



The Spirit of God was being breathed through the streets, and in the houses, and upon the Oddfellows Halls of the Northern edges of Christchurch, not then yet called Ōtautahi. It was the Year of our Lord 1879. The attendees of weekly evening prayer meeting being held in the house of a Mrs Badden, Carlton Place (apparently on Victoria Street, roughly opposite where Knox Church now is - the house no longer exists), felt the larger purposes of God would be served well were they able to call a minister. Already, in response to the unplanned growth of the city beyond the four Avenues, they'd set up a children's programme, providing spiritual food to over 250 youngsters. They were having occasional evening services in the Oddfellows Hall in Montreal Street (now long since demolished and replaced by houses).

Among those attending the prayer meeting were some remarkably able people who knew how to "make things happen". Ability, once stirred by the breathing of the Spirit (through the streets, in the houses, upon the Oddfellows Halls) became an effective mobilizer. On 5 February, 1880, called by the Presbytery of Christchurch to minister to the newly founded North Belt Church, Rev. David McKee stepped onto Kiwi soil. Having left a large number of supportive parishioners behind in the significant parish of Rutland Square in Dublin, Ireland, he came to New Zealand on the recommendation of his doctor, who suggested his weakening lungs needed a more moderate climate. Maybe his doctor was better at medicine than climatology. Seeking sun and warmth, poor Mr McKee came to Christchurch.

People here immediately fell in love with him (and with his wife and their nine little children). His sermons apparently were like "visions" - passion, imagination, prophetic insight. He was known as gentle, modest, but powerful. It was said of him that he could never keep money in his pockets or a comfortable coat on his shoulders for long, since any appearance of a person in need would move him immediately to divest himself of either. It was noted that he had a lamb-like spirit but a lion-like heart. I would have enjoyed meeting him.

About six months into his ministry he died (SIX MONTHS), and was buried in the cemetery in Selwyn Street, Addington. A few years ago, I visited his grave. Purchased by the people of the North Belt Church, it's headed by a tombstone upon which are etched praises of his skill and devotion. A house in Onslow Street, St Albans, was purchased for his widow, and a charitable fund was set up for his children. God bless you, David McKee.

Meanwhile, the Spirit of God continued to blow through the streets, houses and halls of the North Belt. Rev Mr William Dinwiddie, who'd done a long ministry in Camden Road, London, came to minister among the people of the North Belt. Praise Jesus for those who cross the world for the love of Jesus! Well, Mr Dinwiddie stayed for a very short time, then moved for another very short time to St Andrew's on Hospital Corner in town, and then went back to England where he died the following year. He came, he went, he died.

Meanwhile, the Spirit of God continued to blow through the streets, houses and halls of the North Belt. And so it was that in November of the Year of our Lord 1883, Rev. Robert Erwin came to Christchurch. He hadn't come far - just down from St John's in Papatoetoe in Auckland, where he'd been assisting Rev. John Macky (who at one time had been minister of St Andrew's, Howick). Prior to that, he'd trained for ministry at Queens University in Belfast, Northern Ireland. I imagine (knowing what I know of those who went to university at Queens) that he brought to the North Belt a good Northern Irish accent. I wonder how many of the eighty-five members of the congregation actually understood anything he said. Maybe some did, because a report written quite early in his ministry described him as "highly esteemed and gifted". Mr Erwin became Doctor Erwin in 1897, when his old university conferred on him an honorary Doctor of Divinity. They obviously considered him to be doing significant things here, on the other side of the world. The Church at home, on this "other side of the world" honoured him also, electing him to be the Moderator of its General Assembly (1897 and 1904). Dr Erwin ministered through the construction of the building in which now we gather. He presided over its taking on the name "Knox". He ministered through the testing times of the Great War from 1914 to 1918, when it was his task to lead the community in mourning the violent deaths of many of its young men. In this respect it was said of him that he brought "help and comfort to the hearts of the people".

I cannot be said of Dr Erwin that he came, left and died. His ministry here was forty years long. Nevertheless, eventually he did die. Did then the

Spirit of God continue to blow through the streets, houses and halls of the North Belt?

From what the Centenary History of Knox Church calls the "Halcyon Days of Doctor Erwin", we fast forward to the 1960s, the decade during which news began to spread that God had died. The German philosopher Frederick Nietzsche had suspected the death much earlier than this, but it kind of took off in popular thought in the 1960s. I wonder what kind of priest might serve a community well during such a viral spread of knee-capping news. In 1967, Knox welcomed Rev. (later Very Rev) John Murray. John had served in the bustling parish of Taihape, and then been chaplain at the Victoria University of Wellington. He arrived at Knox just when the Lloyd Geering trial was on. He responded not by ignoring it, but by preaching a series of sermons on the issues it raised. The sermons caused some people to leave the church. The King James Bible was lovingly put in a cupboard, and a more modern version placed on the lectern. New hymns were introduced - rumour has it that John knew quite well someone who would go on to be considered one of the country's most successful hymn-writers. He also helped Knox project a prophetic voice into the times of French nuclear testing in the South Pacific.

I met John Murray some years after he'd concluded his eight year ministry at Knox. He still was then, I think only just, the minister of St Andrew's on the Terrace. I remember his strong, black eyebrows and his full head of silver hair. He made a self-deprecating joke, which people around him considered amusing. He became a minister emeritus in 1993, and died in 2017. He is no more.

The writer of the Book of Hebrews observes that "the former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office". They are mortal, so indeed they come and go. Some stay for just a short time. Some stay for a long time. Some stir us up, and some comfort us in times of trouble. Some are tall and imposing (Erwin); some are smaller and breathe badly (McKee). Some preside over halcyon times, and some over rumours of heavenly death. Hebrews notes, simply, that whatever their ministries, they minister, then die.

As one of those who stands in the tradition of ministry which we've explored today, I feel a bit awkward about Hebrews' characterisation of the situation. I would hate to think that Hebrews is trivialising the ministries that we offer - not just the ministers of word and sacrament, but the ministries of every

member of the priesthood of all believers. In an incarnational faith (which is all about divine presence in jars of clay), the quirks and mannerisms of the jars bring authenticity, particularity, reality to our serving of God. We need to honour who we are, and how occasionally we bang into one another and are a little bit clumsy. That's part of the delight of incarnational faith - some of the beauty is in the "clay".

But I **do** understand what I think the central insight is in what Hebrews is saying. It is said that the high priests, who are many in number (because they keep on dying), are joining in for just a moment (in the sweep of the arc of history, just a short moment) a longer, broader, more sustained flow of mercy that comes from God (who holds the whole thing together). Hebrews reminds us that the world will always know grace and life, because grace and life are to be found not in us who died, but in the One who does not die, and who lives that we might live - even after we've done our part.

I suspect that even after this sermon has been preached, the Spirit of God still will blow through the streets and houses and halls of this neighbourhood. I suspect that once Minister Number Eleven has himself gone off to Addington Cemetery, Jesus Christ, the first and the last, still will move people to know that God "so loves this world".

*Before the hills in order stood,  
or earth received her frame,  
from everlasting thou art God  
to endless years the same.  
A thousand ages in thy sight  
are like an evening gone:  
short as the watch that ends the night  
before the rising sun.*

*Our God, our help in ages past,  
our hope for years to come,  
our shelter from the stormy blast,  
and our eternal home.*

A moment of quiet.

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