

Sermon Archive 509

Sunday 17 November, 2024

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reading: Mark 13: 1-8

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



I have a little house in the suburbs. It is well insulated - sunlight shines through the double-glazed windows. I look out onto a private garden planted with things established and new. In my kitchen I make things that are nice to eat. In my comfortable bed, I pull the duvet up under my chin. At night, when I pull the curtains, it's like I'm wrapping it in blanket. My place, it's safe and private. I could almost believe, with the curtains drawn, that it's a world in itself.

The electricity that lights my lights comes from the outside. The water I pour down the sink goes to the outside. Were I not to continue making various online payments, someone from the bank would bang on the door with a mortgagee sale order. Even those who give more effort than I do to live off-the-grid are part of the wider world. And that wider world operates the way it does by virtue of the permission we give to those who rule us. We are not private individuals. We are citizens of a world ruled by the rulers. Their rule, like it or not, affects us. So, I bring you the stories of four rulers - and then we sit a while in the temple courts with Jesus.

-ooOoo-

1. The story of Saul. The people settled upon a model of government that was popular at the time. It was called "monarchy". Grammatically, it comes from "mon", single, and archy (government or rule). So "monarchy" in its most pure and narrow sense isn't about royalty; it's about rule by a single person. And in *this* story, the single person in whom the people placed their trust was Saul. It turned out badly, as one of the critics of the model said it would (Samuel, one of the local prophets). Saul may not have been a person of untrammelled ambition and evil; he turned out just not to have the mental health robustness that the responsibilities of power required. He develops paranoia, to the point that the people who could help him are eliminated by him. He hires a harp player to soothe him with music, but then suspects the music of poisoning him. He starts looking for advice in entrails and oracles

at Endor. While Christopher Cook of the Department of Theology and Religion at Durham University cautions against offering any diagnoses in relation to people who lived millennia ago, a number of modern psychiatrists have given it a "go". Maybe Saul had PTSD from all the battles he'd fought. Maybe he had depression. Maybe he had paranoia or schizophrenia. Whatever the case, the people were not well governed - and maybe an Achilles heel had been identified in a model where everything depends on the mono - the person alone.

2. The story of John. To finance some very expensive but ultimately unsuccessful land wars in France, King John of England had taxed the local barons. Unsurprisingly, this made him unpopular with them. Along with their feeling that he was stealing their money, and not taking them seriously as the hands and feet of "local government", stories began to circulate about John's having abused the daughter of one of the barons. The impression formed of a king who considered himself to be "above the law". The "law" of course, by then had not become the heavily codified, precedent-formed body of laws that we imagine when we hear the word "law". The vagueness of law contributed to the complexity of judging whether the king was operating above it - becoming a "dictator". But the feeling grew that John needed containing. At Runnymede, in 1215, he was presented with a document called "the Articles of the Barons". After ten days of negotiations and editing, John signed what had become known as the Great Charter, the Magna Carta. It made clear that the monarch was not, indeed, above the law, but had to work within it. It was an affirmation that unrestrained power in the hands of a monarch was no way to govern the people. The people had interests too, and that was at the heart of the philosophy of government as it was evolving in England.

3. The story of Queen Victoria. With the principles of the Magna Carta now quite solidly established at home, ships sailed from Great Britain to various corners of the world. Some carried soldiers and diplomats to far flung places where action was required with respect to ex-pat Britons behaving badly. A particular example was the settlement of Kororāreka, in the Bay of Islands, in a country called New Zealand. Charles Darwin had visited Kororāreka and described it as the "hell hole" of the South Pacific - such was the disorder and debauchery. Calls by the indigenous people for the Queen to pull her people into order fell on responsive ears. So the representatives of the mono-arch, the now Magna Carta regulated single sovereign, came to assert some governance on those who would not be governed. The Queen's people found, of course, that setting up a form of

governance was going to be tricky - because, although the British model served one monarch, the local governance of the locals in this place was by a collective of semi-autonomous chiefs. There was no **one person** with whom to strike a governance deal. The British monarchy model was meeting rangatiratanga. How was that going to go? Was monarchy going to be flexible enough to come up with something right for the time and place? What would it look like? How would it serve all the people for whom the hell hole was home? This was clearly a matter taken seriously, since it was in no way like the terra-nullius approach to grabbing land that had gone on in Australia. This seemed to be a brave and legitimate attempt to fashion something new and just. Care seemed to be being given to be mindful that when we say "the people", we are not talking about something two dimensional and fixed. We are talking about something organic, that changes and grows, that is white and brown and in-between. The Many are the One; the One is many. Rulers and people. What kind of model?

4. We fall back a couple of millennia for the story of Socrates. Socrates' people had avoided monarchy, tending instead towards this thing called "democracy". It was a brilliant concept: government for the people, by the people. The people got to choose who would govern them, and you could choose anyone, regardless of any status of birth - choosing them simply because they seemed to have merit. And if it became clear that you'd chosen the wrong ones to rule you, the system allowed for you then to choose someone else. There were wonderful checks and balances in place. That's the theory behind the model.

Within the Athenian reality, though, various things had happened. In 404BC, a group of thirty ambitious people, most imaginatively called "the Thirty" took over the city. Two of the most prominent thirty were past pupils of Socrates. At a time when many elected officials either were killed by the Thirty or fled the city, Socrates had been left unmolested. The common people began to wonder whether Socrates was not a person of a "feathered nest". He also had the habit, after the Thirty were deposed, of asking politicians questions that made them look stupid. They didn't like that. Also, he was inclined to say that the problem with democracy is that it gives great power to the uneducated and plain stupid. Why should stupid people, who are inclined to make dumb decisions, be given power to decide something as important as who should rule the city? I mean, just think what might happen if stupid people are given the vote!

Strangely (or not strangely at all), the Athenian Court accused Socrates of "impiety" and of "corrupting the youth" - two accusations that made no sense, given Socrates' life and work. Strangely (or not strangely at all), he was found guilty and sentenced to death. Democracy was a good model, but when provoked in subtle and not so subtle ways, it found corrupt ways of responding. The idea is that democracy is safer and more just than monarchy. The story of Socrates makes you wonder: is **any** model safe?

-ooOoo-

Sitting in the temple courts, it would be easy to feel quite small. The great, soaring columns stretching way up into the sky, the sheer scale of the dimensions. It is solid. It is strong. It is built to last longer than the wee human beings who shelter in it for a while. As a symbol of our nationhood, as a temple to our culture, as an expression of our god, it stands as the shape of our being "the people" (priests in the holy of holies, citizens in the courts, foreigners in a special place near the edges). It stands, and we who find a place within it or around it, are the people. The structure, the structure, the demographic structure! The power, the governing, the way we shape the power of the people . . .

Jesus leans over to us, who are sitting next to him, and says "It's all coming down, you know. Not a stone will be left. And when it's total rubble, I'm going to build you something new."

We construct our edifices. We engineer our models. We sometimes adapt how we are ruled, but generally stick with what we've inherited (the solid stones that have worked for us for ages). Quietly, almost silently (were it not for the sounds the Spirit makes when blowing through our creaking, groaning structures), Jesus is building something new - something that is of God, something that expresses for the people how God so loves the world.

I am in my little house in the suburbs. I draw the curtains and make my own private world. But power needs to come in (to light the lights). Water needs to escape, so the garage doesn't flood. The bank reserves the right to knock on my door. The world is not going away, and sometimes with fear we think about who might be in charge.

Jesus is building something new. We keep a moment of quiet.

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