

Sermon Archive 511

Sunday 1 December, 2024

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reading: 1 Thessalonians 3: 9-13

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



The plates appear to have nothing but lettuce on them, and that's because they have nothing but lettuce on them. The lettuce cups are, however, waiting for the chicken larb (from the bowl in the centre of the table) to be added. It's a lovely sweet peanutty, limey thing with flecks of chili and other delights. It's the entrée, and will be followed by various other sumptuous things.

I'm the one sitting closest to the camera at the foot of the table. Directly opposite me, at the table's head, is someone who'd come all the way from Australia to attend my 50th birthday celebrations - of which this dinner at my then home was a part. I'd met her during my time in Australia, and the fact that she came all the way to

Dunedin to celebrate with me says something about our friendship. Her first tertiary qualification was in textiles and qualified her to work in a tailor's place off Sydney's Oxford Street where she made the most wonderfully outrageous costumes for the Darlinghurst drag queens. Her second degree was an opera performance one from the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. Qualification Number Three was a medical degree, and these days she heals people.

Another person at the table is my father, who these days is, in the words of the traditional Nine Lessons and Carols prayer, worshipping with us but on another shore and in another light. He was a good man, who very much was loved. Mum is also at the table. She's the one who's pretty much invisible to the camera, since she's leaning over and in deep conversation with the person next to her - like she's **so** committed to conversing that she's not noticed that a photo's being taken. That's not like her at all!

Two other people at the table were a married couple. They no longer are, and despite efforts to hold them both within the wee circle of friends we had, one of them (or maybe some of us) found it just too complicated and drifted away. This sometimes happens - but it's sad. I continue to be fond of them both, and keep touch only with one of them. There's a gap at the table.

Two others at the table were theoretically not there, but it's too complicated to explain why that was. I had invited them to my table, and they had accepted the invitation. I was last at their table a couple of months ago - so that's a lasting friendship, so they're still at the table.

The photo I think must have been taken by someone whom I thought I loved, but now is a stranger to me - and I'm OK with that.

Outside that quite tight little dining room, the organisation which owned the house (and allowed me to live in it) was following on from a ruthless re-structuring of everything. Many jobs had been disestablished and lots of people had gone. When I look at the photo it feels to me like a table has been set on the ark - safe, gentle lighting, giving thanks to God for the food, while some tempest rages outside. People seek one another's company, the comfort of good food shared, the ministry of the table. For that one night (as I turned 50), together we sat, enjoyed one another, laughed, blessed, clinked our glasses. I don't think it was "eat, drink, be merry, for tomorrow we die" - although in some ways some of us were to die (life, spirit, fortune, love, marriage, losing touch, staying in touch). At the table we gather, we are nourished, we know it is good to be alive. Amid the turbulence, and before other turbulences, for just that moment anyway, in that snap of time, we were with one another. We are "with us". Was God?

-ooOoo-

Our Tradition of Faith has a number of table stories. The first one is that of the Passover meal. On the night before God was to lead them out from the place of their slavery, while an Angel of Death was to wreak havoc on their oppressors, the Hebrew people were told to gather in their homes. Cook lamb with bitter herbs. Light candles, say prayers. Look across the table at those familiar ones who are about to run with you, run like the devil's at your heels. You're about to enter a time where believing that God is with you is as important as the air you'll gasp. I am the Lord your God, and I'll be with you.

The second big one is that exact meal, remembered by Jesus with his disciples on the night on which he's betrayed. This is my body. This is my blood. Blood-curdling imagery if you think about it. But it's saying that there no longer is a separation between Christ and the people. He is in them, as they are in him. Something about this meal means there never again can be the question "is God with us?" Jesus says: "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me."

There also is the feeding of the five thousand (told many times). As tiny little morsels of food are shared, shared into this great vacuum called the "hunger of the world", the satisfying of the hunger says "God is with us". And not just any god - a god who might exist - but a God who is known in the feeding of the people. Not God of heaven - but God with us. This is what God's table says - it says "God is with us". As we gather with others who are longing to be fed, as we see one another face to face around what God has made possible, God is with us. We wait for a god who might be something like the host at a table. God is with us.

-ooOoo-

Paul had visited Thessalonica a while back. As was his regular missionary practice, he'd shared his faith with the locals, and some of them had warmed to him. Some bloke called Jason, in particular, welcomed him into his home, and a tender new little community had come together - all kind of fragile, but lovely. It's written in Acts 17 that Jewish leaders there became jealous of the fragile, lovely little group. Fragile, little, vulnerable - but obviously presenting something that the establishment found threatening. So, with the help of some "ruffians in the marketplace" (wonderful description of establishment - "ruffians in the marketplace"), they cranked up the violence, and Paul had had to run away. Now, in his letter to those left in the lurch, he admits that it's worried him since that he didn't get to finish telling them about the Jesus who will return. Their faith, so it seems to him, is "incomplete". It needs adding to it "something that is lacking".

I wonder what the lacking thing was. I wonder what particular fact or missing doctrine haunted Paul. And I wonder why it was that he couldn't just write it down for them in the letter he's writing - God facts number 5 and 8B, sub-clause iv.

What Paul writes instead is that he's praying hard that he might have the opportunity to see them again, face to face. He prays that God might direct his way, so that he can join them in person. Letters are OK. Sending representatives is OK. But seeking out a genuine, real live "face to face" is better - better when seeking to embody the returning Christ who is "God with us".

Paul's prayer was answered. We know that he got back to Thessalonica several times. I wonder, in fact, since he went there quite often, whether it ever got to the stage that some of them saw him on the horizon and said "again? It's interesting that in his **second** letter, he gives a bit of time to talking through what to do with people who are perceived as bludging on the community. [2 Thessalonians 3:6-15]. I suspect rather though, maybe because I'm something of a romantic, that each time Paul visited their city, the Thessalonians set a table and had a celebration. "Welcome Paul; pull up a chair; we see you face to face". You see, maybe this is a faith that can't be completed with an essential missing piece of doctrine, a second series of seminars - but that comes to life in this in-between time, as human community welcomes the one who would love, and finds now that God is with us. Paul is not God. But as the longing to see one another face to face is met, is fed, is enshrined at the table, faith becomes complete enough to know that God is with us.

When I pray for you, when I want to see you, be with you, and it comes to pass that you welcome me to your table, and our hearts sing - then it's easier to talk about the Christ who returns, and to know that God is with us.

How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith. Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

Gathering around the table of the Lord, knowing the blessing of being face to face, we keep a moment of quiet.

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