

Sermon Archive 516

Sunday 29 December, 2024

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reading: Romans 8: 18-25

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



It is reckoned that Paul wrote his letter to the Christian community in Rome about seven years before the city went up in flames and the famously fiddling Emperor Nero decided to blame the fire on the Christians. Persecutions don't tend just to erupt from nothing - they're like the lancing of a boil that's festered for a while. Before they burst, they grow, they develop their own sense of tension. Persecution grows out of an already present hatred. So, probably in the Spring of AD57, Paul is writing to a small group in a large city, who likely already are feeling unpopular, out of step with the culture. Not yet have they been thrown to the lions or put to the sword - but they would have felt it coming. They lived in a city of fabulous architecture, vibrant commerce and increasingly ruthless treatment of those who were different. "Consider our present sufferings", writes Paul, and the readers of the letter will have had plenty to draw on.

In recent times, they will have watched their Emperor kill his mother. They would have noticed his private tutor, a famous philosopher called Seneca, run out of the city and forced to commit suicide. "Why did Seneca kill himself", part of the community will ask; while another part of the community will change the subject, or say "no one really knows, but let's not speak of it - this is a conversation we shouldn't be having, the walls have ears, you know". In recent times, they will have noticed a new decadence in public life, maybe the first few signs in the culture that the culture's got something reddish-green growing on it. In recent times, they even may have experienced tensions within the four walls of the church, with Jews and Gentiles finding fault in one another - when maybe once upon a time just loving Jesus was enough to hold it all together. In recent times, it may have felt like the whole thing was bound to catch on fire (but not the good fire of Pentecostal flame).

It would not have been an easy time in which to nurture hope, or light, or peace. Easier, rather, to harvest nervousness and fear. "Consider our present sufferings", the letter says . . .

Inviting the Roman Christians to consider their sufferings, Paul goes on then to say this anxiety we have, these pains we feel, are not the pains of death. Rather they are birth pains - the pains of something new that is coming to life.

Paul, you see, believes that through Christ, God has begun to build the new creation. It's on its way - won't be turned around or away. Amid the suffering, that is real, coming forth is the world as it ought to be. Because he believes that heaven is being built - it is a project swinging into motion, we can see amid the mess things that will give us hope. "Hope!?" we scoff! We see nothing to feed our hope . . .

Maybe Paul pauses before he says indeed "you don't hope for what you see. You hope for what you **don't** see. How about you go in search for something not yet visible - and search with patience". Bloody Paul!

Exploring a few matters that came to us in 2024, let's go looking for things we cannot see - and maybe see emerging "the future glory of a new creation". Searching our times for the new creation . . .

-ooOoo-

In this current suffering, we see nothing to feed our hope.

Te Tumu Toi, or the New Zealand Arts Foundation, tops up its list of award winners each year to keep at twenty the number of living Kiwis to be celebrated as artists of national significance. This year two were added. The first was Pita Sharples, for his contributions to Kapa Haka and the revitalisation of te reo Māori. Once upon a time, not many people were all that worried as the Māori language quietly was fading away. Interviewed about how that quiet fading had been experienced in his own family situation, here's what Pita said:

So I grew up in a little village; the Māori elders spoke Māori to themselves and English to us. And we weren't taught any Māori at all. So we grew up Māori-less. Then I went to boarding school, Te Aute College, where they spoke Māori, and people came from all over the country. And it was taught, and almost half of them learned it from childhood, and so I started to learn and speak Māori - that was my goal. And still my mother would speak to me only in English. And then one day in my last year (I was head boy), I got this letter. I recognised my mum's writing on the envelope. O good, money! So I opened the envelope. And it was all in Māori; and I cried. She had broken the shackles of colonisation, you know; she just finally admitted that she'd been processed - and from that day on she spoke Māori all the time to us kids . . .

Elsewhere in the interview, Pita notes that many people today still don't see value in indigenous languages. Why, they ask, put energy into a language that's not used by most of the rest of the world? Where's the practical value? Māori cultural renaissance is a backward step - they say. In 2024, Pita was added to the list of artists to be treasured, because he has strengthened a people's voice, and through the voice an identity - and through an identity a pride, and through pride, the becoming more abundant in life. Authentic expression, pride, standing

tall in who we are. Could it be that amid the current suffering, when we see these things growing, that we are seeing the emerging of the new creation?

In this current suffering, we see nothing to feed our hope.

Also added to the Arts Foundation list in 2024 was Neil Finn, for writing many songs. Asked about his song-writing process, Neil said:

Well it's the magic, power and mystery of music that keeps me compelled. If there's a manual for it, or a science behind it, I have yet to find it. When it clicks, it's the most wondrous feeling . . . The art form of making great pop music is that you make it sound incredibly easy, like it just fell out of your mouth. or just out of your head. And it's not always that easy - it takes a lot of work and concentration. I admire people that can tell stories in songs, but I don't really want to have to concentrate on the narrative when I'm listening to a song for the first time. I like the whole thing to be a little excuse to go dreaming for a while.

Some people would probably prefer for their children to become doctors, lawyers or accountants, rather than those who create excuses for dreaming. Again, it is felt that there isn't much practical value in song. But maybe the creative impulse, the inclination of the human being to dream, the giving of energy (within the current suffering) to that which is nothing but beautiful, delightful or fun - maybe in these we see the emerging of the new creation.

In this current suffering, we see nothing to feed our hope.

In 2024, policies were put in place to regulate the reintroduction of shipping live animals to foreign locations where they can be killed and processed for the meat market. A "gold standard of care" for the animals in transit has been promised, but many animal rights organisations have expressed concern. It's seen as a backward step in terms of caring for animals, but we are reminded many times of the economic benefit it will produce - money trumping concerns about welfare. In this realm of suffering, we see little to give us hope.

Seemingly, out of nowhere comes the announcement that the minister of racing has cancelled greyhound racing. Urgent legislation is raced through parliament to protect the dogs that soon will be surplus to commercial requirements. Critics of the minister cynically suggest that his cancellation of the dogs is just to boost gambling on the horses, for which he has a keenness. They also complain that he's done nothing about "rodeos" (indeed with the emphasis on the wrong syllable). But if you're a greyhound, you mightn't care about that all that much. Liberation from your slavery, freedom from risk and commodification. Apprehension of vulnerability. Care and protection. Is this growing of responsibility, this exercising of power to mitigate the pain of others (even the greyhounds), a sign of the emerging of the new creation?

In this current suffering, we see nothing to feed our hope.

2024 was a year in which stories were told of those who had suffered greatly at the hands of state and faith-based organisations who should have cared for them. Lake Alice Hospital loomed large. Various Presbyterian caring organisations were dishonourably mentioned. Truth was spoken. Voices were heard. Admissions were made. Responsibility was taken. Apologies were issued. Perhaps restitution will be offered. And maybe, measures will be put in place to make sure that past errors are not repeated.

Again, the critics may say that this is simply about the past - a looking back into history. The critics may say that. But when people find the courage to admit fault, to say "sorry", to be humble before the truth for the sake of a better tomorrow (A BETTER TOMORROW), I say that this is a stirring in our present times of the "yet to be" beautiful new creation.

In this current suffering, we see nothing to feed our hope.

In a city somewhat North of here, Dave Letele had been operating a food bank. 2024 was the year in which the government funding that kept it just above the viability line was withdrawn. Since the books now were just impossible, a notice of closure was issued. To see a committed and spirited fighter give up was sad. To wonder how legions of the poor were going now to find food was huge. **In this current suffering, we see nothing to feed our hope.**

From the wings of the stage, in a place dark enough to provide anonymity, a faceless person with no name, gave Dave a commitment to keep the foodbank open. In these very real times of suffering (unemployment, hunger, dereliction of social duty) came something called "generous". We do indeed, sometimes see something to feed our hope - and to shine light from the new creation.

The sermon now is full. There's no more space for other stories.

-ooOoo-

When Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, he told them (who knew much of present suffering, and had fear of worse to come) that they should look for what they yet cannot quite see. "Go looking", he said, "for things that will give you hope. You **will** find them", he said, because God, even now, is bringing about the new creation. Approaching 2025, we indeed will search for what we yet cannot see - but for now, we keep a moment of quiet.

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