

Sermon Archive 519

Sunday 19 January, 2025

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch
Reflections prompted by the death
of Dame Tariana Turia

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Introduction:

Tariana Turia was born eighty years ago, and was brought up by a village around the Whanganui River. In 1996, she was given a mid-rank position on the Labour Party's party list and entered parliament. She became an electorate member of parliament in 2002, for Te Tai Hauāuru. In 2004, the Labour Party generated the Seabed and Foreshore Bill, which many people now consider to have been the most "grievous treaty breach of the modern era". Being a party bill, all Labour members were required to vote in its support, including its Māori members, who all felt conflicted. They wanted to vote against it, but came under party pressure. All but one of them gave in to the pressure - the one exception being Tariana, who resigned from the party, went off to form a new Party, Te Pati Māori, and was re-elected under that banner with a support rate in the electorate of 94%. She came out the other end of the crisis not only with the support of her people, but with a conviction that she had done the right thing. Had she? When she died a couple of weeks ago, the consensus was that she had been a person of principle, integrity and strength.

What I offer this morning are some clips from an interview Dame Tariana did with Morgan Godfrey in 2019, interspersed with some reflections and readings.

First Video Clip

Tariana

I was raised by my aunties and my uncle at Putiki, about 200 yards from the river, and raised quite a strict environment, but a very loving environment. And you know, essentially all our lives we were taught right from wrong. I remember an incident (I remember it so well) about stealing. I remember finding a 10 cent coin in one of the bedrooms as I was helping clean. And I took it, and I took it to the shop which was just across the road, and bought some lollies. And the kids and I, my cousins and I, we were sitting on the veranda eating the lollies; and out comes my aunty Wai. She said, "well, where did you get the money from?" And

I said I found it. She said "did you think it was yours? Did you know it was yours?" I said I knew it wasn't mine. And she said "Why did you spend it?" I thought my God; and she said "you know that is stealing - when you knowingly take something, use it, knowing that it's not yours". And I recall running down to my Auntie Pai who lived next door, and telling her that she'd accused me of being a thief. She was quite horrified initially, but it was really good lesson because I remembered that all of my life. Don't take things and think that you can use them for yourself.

First Reflection: Aunties' Advice

She reported her aunty's questions in a very calm way, so I'm imagining that the aunty was indeed calm when asking them. No shouting, just simple questions: did you believe that the money was yours? If you didn't, then why did you spend it? The little girl runs to her other aunty probably for reassurance - as little girls do - and boys - trying to circle the wagons. But still the question remained in the conscience: if it wasn't yours, why did you spend it?

Other children might have argued the principle of "finders keepers". Others might have pointed out that the lollies were shared with cousins, so the offence wasn't selfish. But sometimes truth is so convincing, you don't even bother to raise a resistance.

I'm reminded of Jesus' statement "let the one among who has no sin, throw the first stone". Without argument, the accusers drop their stones and just walk away. I'm reminded of the time the experts tried to trap him with a question about resurrection, which he answered magnificently well. It is written "after that no one dared to ask him any question". Ah, the Word of God is . . . sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." [Hebrews 4:12]. Truth speaks.

The woman who feels that it is wrong when a government takes the sea bed away, stands on her principles, because she knows what stealing is, and knows that stealing will be seen as wrong - because truth is obvious. And maybe it falls to us, as a community of faith, to cultivate among us respect for the simple ethical things. Don't steal. Don't kill. Don't lie. Love God and neighbour as you love yourself. Yes, they can be unwelcome words from an aunty - but also they can be markers that make us magnificent people who navigate more complicated ethical waters well. Sometimes, it's as simple as doing the obvious, and starting from there.

Lesson: Micah 6: 6-8

Second Video Clip

Morgan

What were those late night negotiations and phone calls with Bill English and John Key like, trying to push Whanau Ora through? Was it a tough slog?

Tariana

Not really, because Bill got it. I knew that he knew exactly what we were talking about. He comes from a family of eleven kids, got six of his own. So he understood that whole "whanau dynamics" thing. And I think also he believed that we had to stand on our own two feet. I think he did believe that. With John Key, I think John was more worried about the cost and the money, and what their voting public would think - because in a way, when you're in here, everything is political, and so you're constantly thinking about is "will Joe Public vote for our party at the next election if we agree to this". I think that's at the forefront of any political party's thinking? Whether they admit it or not, that's how it is.

Morgan

Was it a funny contrast for you that a conservative like Bill English got this, got the idea of empowering Māori, but perhaps under Labour it may have been a bit more of a paternalistic approach to Whanau Ora - they would have viewed it more paternalistically?

Tariana

I knew when I very first came to Parliament, that Bill English was an ally and a friend - because he used to ring me up. He was the Minister of Health, and he would ring me up and talk to me about health issues, about issues of how things could be done better for our people. He often spoke to me on those matters, and I had huge respect and regard for him - that he would do that. I must admit that I don't think my colleagues were very impressed when they found out that I was having telephone conversations with him. But, um, you know, I came into this game to make a difference for our people. And if it had to come through whoever, that didn't bother me. It wasn't about me, or the political party I was in - it was about getting big gains for people. Otherwise there seemed no purpose to being here.

Second Reflection: Odd bed-fellows

Who are you willing to work with? With whom are you willing to associate?

The world reckoned that Jesus hadn't worked that out yet - because he often associated with tarnished people - "tarnished" people. He became a bit impatient

with this kind of criticism. In one frustrated outburst, he said "John the Baptist came neither eating nor drinking, and you say 'he has a demon'; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say 'behold a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners'." Exasperated, Jesus was, at claims that he was keeping the wrong company!

In the gospel incident wonderfully called the "strange exorcist", the disciples tell Jesus that they found someone casting out demons in his name, even though he wasn't one of them - not "in the party". Jesus says to them "don't stop him; for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon after to speak evil of me. For whoever is not against us, is for us". There's a sense of a greater goal - greater than the smaller, better-recognised factions of who we know. No, we would never work with the Muslims. Never work with the Buddhists. Never work with the atheists. Tariana would never work with Bill English.

We need to critique our associations - and the only way to do that properly, is to revisit the question: what is the work to which we are called?

Lesson: 1 Corinthians 3: 4-7

Third Video Clip

Voice-over

In 2003, the relationship between Labour and its Māori MPs was put to the test. A landmark decision by the Court of Appeal ruled the definition of Māori land did not exclude the foreshore and sea bed. Māori property rights to it had not been extinguished, and the extent of those rights could be tested in the Māori land court.

Morgan

When the Ngati Apa decision came out of the courts, did you realise at the time that it would be a historic moment?

Tariana

I certainly knew it was going to become a moment that would define those of us who were tangata whenua in Parliament. I knew that people would have to be prepared to either stand with our people or stand against them. I wasn't prepared to stand against them.

Morgan

That's right. You went home, didn't you, when the decision came? What way am I going to vote on the foreshore and seabed, you went home.

Tariana

Absolutely, I did. About 300 people turned up to the hui. And they were very clear; in my whole electorate, I only got one e-mail that I recall that asked me to please vote for that, because they didn't want me to get kicked out. Yeah I only got one e-mail telling me that. The rest of them said to me no, we have to stand up for what we believe, and that's why you're there.

Morgan

It's an incredible contrast on one side, Māori almost entirely back in your position, but then on the other side, the Labour Party appearing to come down pretty hard on you. What kind of personal pressure will they putting you under? Was Helen Clark on the phone; was she sending the staff down to talk to you?

Tariana

All of those things. Mmm.

Morgan

What kind of toll did it take?

Tariana

Because of the way that I've been bought up, that if you knew that something was right, that's what should drive you, in my heart of hearts, I knew that the only decision that I could make would be to leave. And I also knew that I would not be able to fulfil the desires of our people if I just sat there and accepted that it was an OK thing to do. It felt like a really pivotal moment in all of our lives, and I thought, gosh - I was so disappointed, I have to say in my colleagues, and Parekura, I'd been close to Parekura for years and years. I was devastated when they decided to stay, because I really and truly believed that had we all stood by what we've decided, which was to go to Labour and say to them we will step outside of the party, but we will go into a coalition with you. And pretty sadly, I think a lot of pressure was put on to the others to stay. They were given ministerials. Yeah, and I think too that we didn't quite have the confidence in ourselves. You know, to make that stand, to believe that we could come back in as an independent entity. And yet when I think back over that time, I know in my heart that it would have been the beginning of true Māori politics in this country; I do believe that - because the people who were there at that time, were all quite strong people. Yep, definitely.

Morgan

Does that show, you know, the suffocating power, not necessarily of any particular government, but of the Crown, that they could do that to those other Māori MPs?

Tariana

Absolutely. And I never, ever held it against them, because I understood the machinery of this place, and knew that it would be the most significant move, ever, by our people in Parliament. And I wasn't sure whether we were all brave enough. I think that luckily for me, I didn't care if I got back in or not, because that can be a big motivating factor. I didn't care. And when Archie Tairaroa, my cousin, he talked to me about Matiu, and how disappointed they were when Matiu formed Mana Motuhake, and the people didn't vote for him, they went back to Labour. And Archie said to me, you know, the same thing could happen to you. And I said that's true, but I don't care.

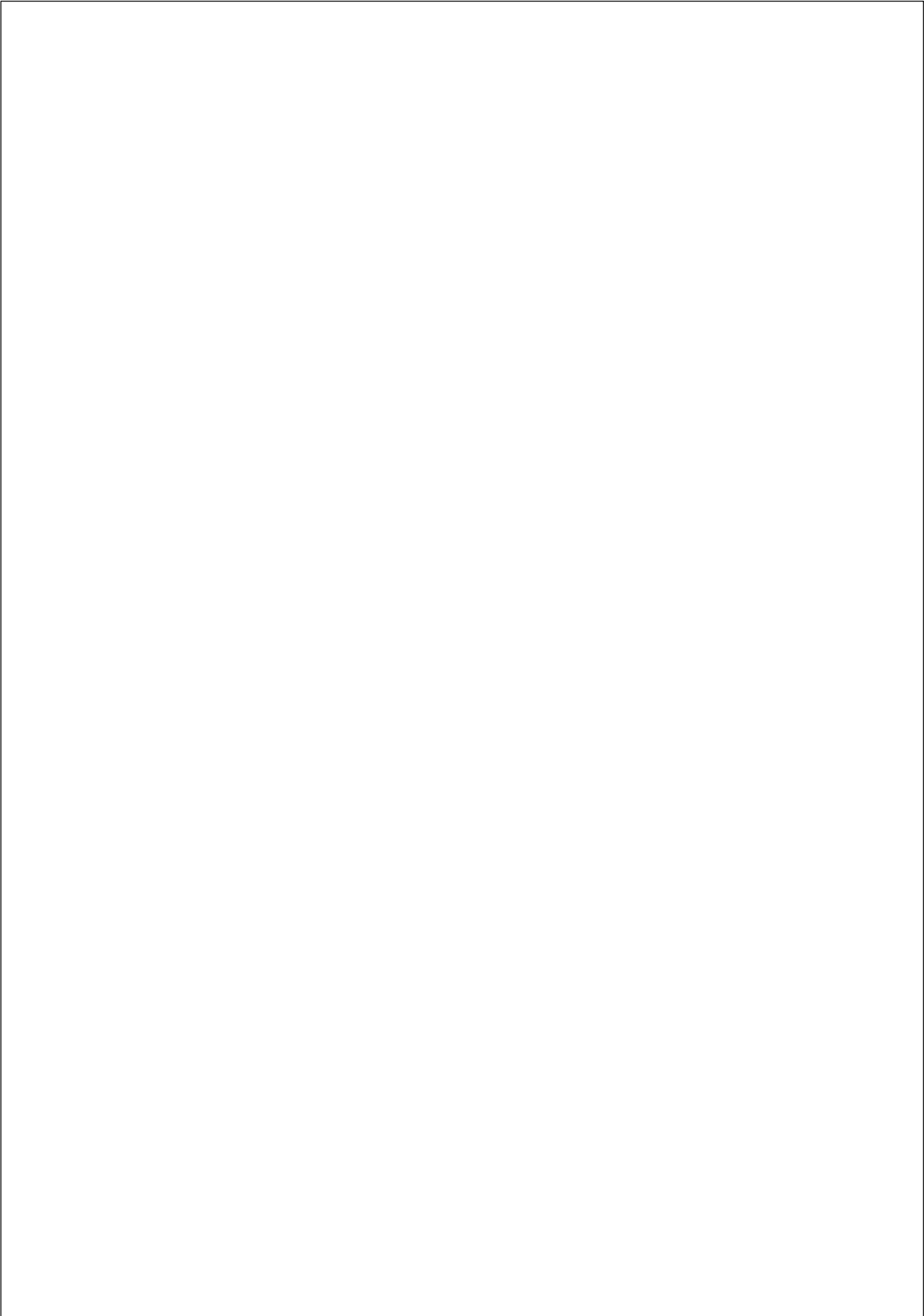
Third Reflection: I didn't care

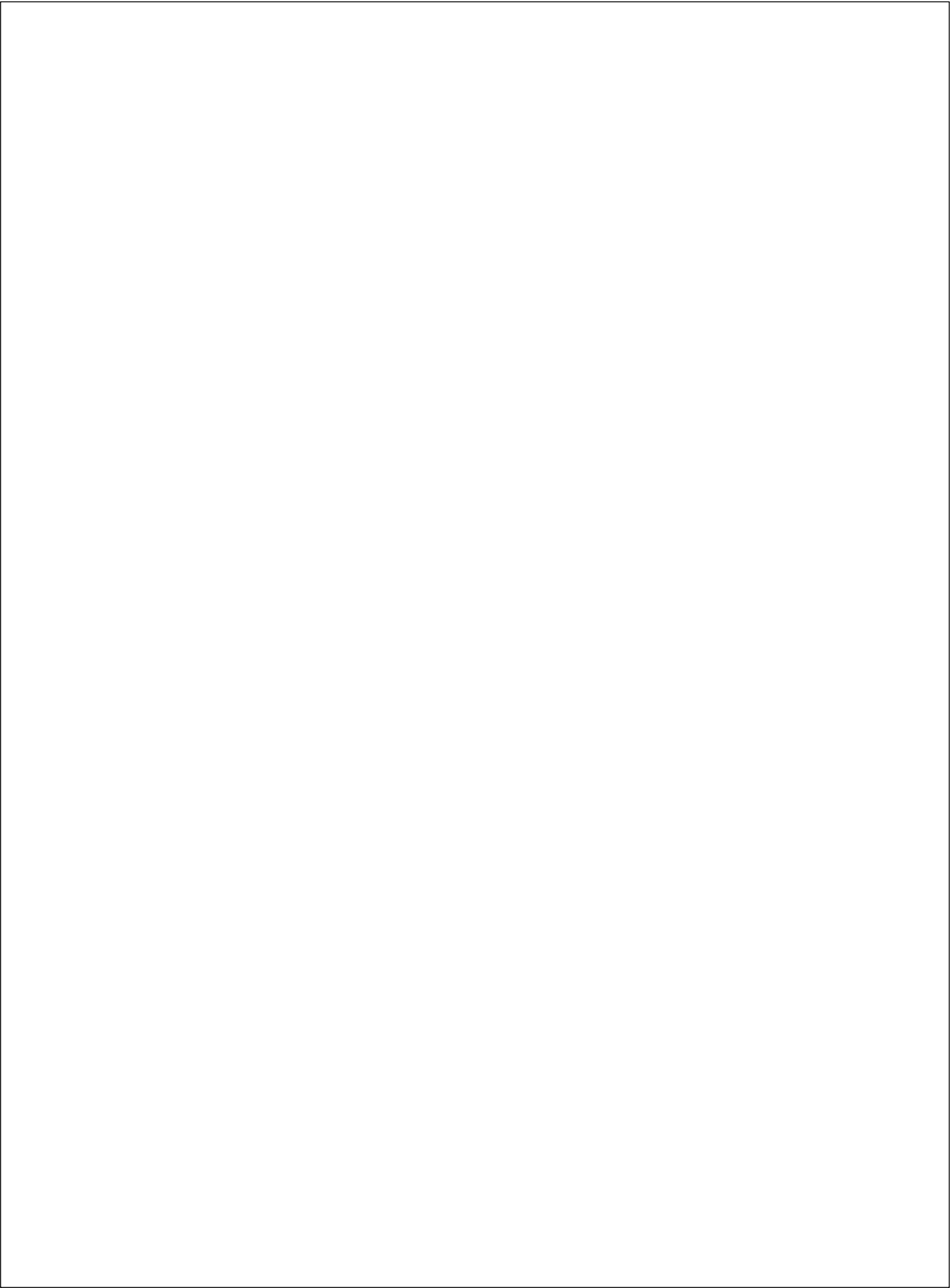
There were moments in Jesus' life, when he was encouraged to pull back from the ministry that was looking like it was going to become costly for him. One such moment was between him and his disciple Peter, someone who cared for him very much. "Lord, forbid it that you should go to Jerusalem and die", Peter had said. I imagine that receiving concern from someone very close to you, urging you to do the expedient (maybe only one email), might be unsettling. Don't sacrifice yourself - there has to be another way. No need to be brave, just let us love you, and keep you safe . . .

Because of the way that I'd been brought up, if you knew something was right . . . in my heart of hearts, I knew that the only decision was to leave.

Before all that is dangled before us, can we say, in the strength of who we are, "I just don't care"? To whom do we belong? What are we here for? Are we brave enough?

Lesson: Matthew 4: 8-11





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