

## Sermon Archive 518

Sunday 2 February, 2025

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Lesson: Psalm 84

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



At the beginning of her sermon the other week, Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde, said "Again my warm welcome to all who have gathered in this house of prayer for **all** people". By the time she finished her sermon, it was clear that by "all people", she had in mind not just rich and powerful, but also the following:

- people who pick our crops and clean our office buildings,
- who labour on poultry farms and meat packing plants,
- who wash the dishes after we eat in restaurants
- who work the night shifts in hospitals,
- the rainbow community,
- the poor and the frightened.

Not everyone enjoyed the sermon. In fact, one person called it "nasty". Was that not an eloquent assessment!

It was ten years and one day ago that we held the formal opening of this rebuilt church. It was a day of happiness, gratitude, relief, pride - and homecoming. There were trumpets on the reredos, a moderator knocking on the door, few spare spaces in the pews, and a few tears in a few eyes. The service began with the hymn "All creatures of our God and King", and also featured "Let us build a house where love can dwell".

I am told that early on in the conversations about whether to rebuild, or simply just to go home and "call it a day", it became clear that Ōtautahi Christchurch needed a church that was **nasty** - for inclusive Christian community was rare, and what Knox had to offer (and for the sake of which Knox would rebuild) was a "house of prayer for all people".

That the house of prayer should be for all people was based mainly on the way that we read the ministry of Jesus, who was more keen to open doors than to close them. Jesus took seriously those whom the established religious institution dismissed. As noted a couple of weeks ago, although mocked for being a drinker and friend of sinners, Jesus "considered unimportant" many of the things that the establishment considered determinative for the exclusion of the sick, the disturbed, the ritually unclean, the culturally diverse. Jesus wanted all of these people to know that they belonged in the house of God's care. A house for all people!

Another key Biblical driver for me anyway, and maybe for the people who framed Knox's inclusiveness, was the episode where Peter processes the vision of some kind of sheet coming down from heaven, filled with animals long considered unclean. "Eat these things" said the voice. "Certainly not" said Peter - "they're unclean". Only then to hear the voice retorting "please don't call unclean what I declare clean". This is a key turning point for the Christian faith as it grows from a small in-house, predominately Jewish oriented faith, to a faith for all people. All people. Was it important to build a house for all people? Nasty question.

A particularly nasty poem comes in the form of Psalm 84. A pilgrim, possibly having walked a long way to get there, approaching God's house in Jerusalem, takes delight in noticing that a little bird has made her nest in the eaves of the temple. "Even the sparrow finds a home in this house" the psalmist sings. There is comfort for the pilgrim and there is praise of God, when all creatures of our God and King find a place in what we call the house of God. Tidy people might have removed the bird's nest - it doesn't belong there (certainly didn't have planning permission). But no, for the psalm-singing pilgrim, the presence of the nest is a high and holy, welcoming and reconciled form of nastiness. Let us build a nasty house.

-ooOoo-

It wasn't just Knox, of course, that ten years ago was rebuilding. The whole of the city was doing the same. A special edition of the Christchurch Press from 31 July 2012 included coverage of a new

plan for the rebuilding of the city. The plan included something called the Frame - lots of green space for people to enjoy - free and openly available. The Frame was to include a playground for the children - no fence around it. It was to include a stadium for large and festive gatherings and games - due for completion by March 2017. It would have an arts precinct (location at that time yet to be decided), a sports precinct, a health precinct. There was to be easy-access room for all these aspects of community life. Dare one say "room for all the people"?

Reaction to the plan was in the main very positive. 78% of the people surveyed said it was "fabulous or very good". 8% said it was disappointing. Good, I suppose that all the people were asked (well, 3,303 people). The main concern expressed at the time was that the central city was only part of the city. Other parts of the city included the suburbs, where the majority of residents actually had their homes. The Press reported that a group of 300 protestors gathered in the rain outside the Civic Offices while invited guests inside watched Council presentations about the plan. The protestors were reported to be chanting "people first, homes first".

A home for the people:

- people who pick our crops and clean our office buildings,
- who labour on poultry farms and meat packing plants,
- who wash the dishes after we eat in restaurants
- who work the night shifts in hospitals,
- the poor and the frightened.

All the people . . . Ten years and one day on from the official opening of this house of prayer for all people, and thirteen after the launching of the city rebuild, I wonder how we feel we are going. On the first Sunday of our Late Summer Season of Caring, what remains to be done?

In terms of the fabric of the **church**, the shining copper exterior is now well settled into a pleasant, weathered patina. I think our

reputation for inclusiveness is spreading. In terms of the rebuild of the **city**, in February of last year, 667 EQC cases still needed settling. It is noted that the plan's assertion that Cathedral Square would continue to be the heart of the city seems, to date, forlorn. The physical progress (or in some cases **lack** of physical progress) is easy to see, and so relatively easily measurable.

Not so easily measurable is the progress with the sorts of social principles that inhabited the plan. Is this yet a city with room for all the people? Are all the policies of our local government in line with fair and open access to public space? Is every suburb feeling that it is being taken seriously? How resisted here is the culture of contempt? It is harder to answer these questions. Perhaps the questions could simply be described as nasty, and put aside . . .

Throughout this month, and into the start of next month, we observe a Season of Caring. We'll look at caring for our country, for all of humanity, and for the wider creation (in its living, connected intricacy). We start the month with a closer focus on a small house of prayer in a re-built, re-building city - a city that is our most immediate home.

May the God of care, grow us, that we might be a people of care. May God make us "nasty".

The Knox Church website is at: <http://www.knoxchurch.co.nz.html> . Sermons are to be found under News / Sermons.