

Sermon Archive 534

Sunday 20 April, 2025

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reflection for Easter Day

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Summary of Lent: The Season of Slavery

This year, we used Lent (forty days plus Sundays leading up to Easter) to explore the theme of Slavery.

First week: we looked at how the early identity of the Hebrew people was formed by their experience of having been slaves in Egypt. We explored how fear of the other, and the need most societies have to have work completed that no one really wants to do, created a culture within which slavery could develop. We looked at Jesus' words about his life being a ransom - a fee paid for the release of others. Did Easter provide us with a vision?

Second week: we looked at how the Pharaoh of Egypt was struck by something called "hardness of heart" - and we wondered what that meant. Was it attachment to a personal grudge? Was it a perverse enjoyment of being in power while others were powerless? We looked at how God's chosen "hero to bash the hardened heart" was overwhelmed with a sense of not being fit for the task. We wondered whether Easter provided us with a vision.

Third week: we looked at how the old fashioned patterns of slavery found new forms of slavery in the modern world. We looked at vulnerable Andaman from Thailand, falling into an impossible situation. Exploring the politics of the time when the United States was dealing with slavery at home, we looked at how many advocates for emancipation were killed. We wondered whether Easter provided a vision for something better.

Fourth week: we looked at the stories of two slaves set free - Jourdan Anderson of Ohio in the Nineteenth Century, and Onesimus in the First. Moving from the intense personal experiences of being captive, then

maybe being free, we wondered about the role played in their freedom of Christian faith. We wondered about the power of Easter.

Fifth week: we heard Jesus announcing that his ministry was to be a setting free of those who were oppressed - the great Jubilee and Year of the Lord's Favour. We wondered whether Easter's vision might have found its first stirrings in what Jesus was beginning to do.

Sixth week: Jesus chooses to ride a donkey into Jerusalem, so throws our expectations of how God's shattering of slavery is going to work. Service, humility, dying crept into the picture of how slavery would be overturned.

Maundy Thursday and Good Friday - slavery seemed to have won.

That was Lent. Lent is followed by Easter.

Reading: 1 Peter 3: 18-22

I don't want to get bogged down in a world view story that's not going to work for us, on a day when we're celebrating something living, wonderful and free. So I will be quick just now before the Easter sermon.

The First Letter of Peter comes from a time when persecuted people were hanging on grimly to the fact that, in the midst of their suffering, they'd be OK in eternity, because they'd put their trust in Jesus, whom they had lived at the right time to see, and whose saving significance they'd come to know. Having expressed their faith in Jesus, Death (always prowling in times of persecution) wouldn't take them away. Through faith, though in death, they'd find room within the arms of the Lord.

A big question for them at the time, though, was what about their parents, or grandparents, who'd never heard of Jesus? Why should **those** people fall away from the arms of the Lord, simply because they'd died before Jesus rose?

As representatives of their parents and grandparents, the anxious people came up with some famous historically disadvantageously placed people - the family of Noah. Identified as good souls, worthy of saving from judgment's flood, nevertheless they died before the time of Jesus, so kind of, as it were, in terms of salvation, missed the boat.

In response to this concern, by the time of Peter's first letter, the early Church came up with something latterly called the "harrowing of Hell". After his death, finding himself in the Realm of the Dead, Jesus had an opportunity to introduce himself to all the good people languishing there - the fallen through the cracks of the grace of God. In the Harrowing of Hell, Jesus gave the pre-Christian people the option of receiving him, and coming along with him through to eternal life. The harrowing of Hell.

This model begs so many questions! And to be honest, I'm not all that worried about Noah's family! But what I really like about this image is the idea of a killed Christ, before he even gets a chance to realise that he's alive again (or maybe even that he'd died), goes straight to those who are called "spirits in prison" and sets to setting them free. Even before he rises, even before he knows he's the risen One, it's in his heart to set the people free. First - set the people free.

And so, a super short Easter Sermon.

-ooOoo-

Hey Jesus; a friend of mine has been wondering about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. Apparently, it's a question about spirit and physicality - so has great relevance to how spiritual things can fit into the world of creatures of time and space. It's really important. On your way into Hell, or on your way out, would you care to comment.

Jesus says: thank you, no. I'm alive, and will set the people free.

Hey Jesus; I'm writing a paper called "a short theology of disagreement". It's my tentative approach to bring peace to a church that's worried about who's making love to whom. I've got four main sections sorted so far: tensions in scripture, the role of liberty of conscience, the difference between uniformity and unity, apostacy and the heart of the matter. Would you care to comment?

Jesus says; good luck with that Matthew - to the extent that it will rise above being words and actually make a difference. I'll trust you with it all - and maybe see you when you get to the place that I will be! We might even hug and I'll put a wee kiss on your cheek - good and faithful servant. The place that I will be? Setting the people free.

Hey Jesus; I'm wondering about this old bloke down the road who goes out onto his driveway to feed the ducks, then when the ducks come to be fed, he swears at them like a trooper. I'm kind of wondering what confused heart wants to feed the birds but can only shout at them when they come. Is he a slave? Lord Jesus, could I believe that you might meet him on the driveway?

Jesus says; Matthew, could you take care of the ducks? I'll be harrowing hell on the driveway - setting the people free.

Hey Jesus; what about the Hebrew slaves? What about Andaman from Thailand? What about the RSE workers and those other ones living in shipping containers? How about Jordain Anderson and Onesimus? How about the craving, the cash flow, the "how much am I worth", the "I am sinking", the bars on the windows or across the eyes?

Jesus says - Call it a first instinct - a principal tendency. Call it an almost immediate reflex - hit the joint in the right place, and the limb will jump! Before I know anything, I am out there, down there, up there, wherever, finding the slaves and setting them free.

I told you in the time of my flesh:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to set free those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."*

And now, I who was dead in my flesh, am alive for evermore - as you hear me speak.

Freedom, freedom . . .

O Jesus, you rise. You rise indeed - and maybe that will catch . . . so that all your children shall be free.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qviM_GnJbOM

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