

Sermon Archive 535

Sunday 27 April, 2025

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reading: Acts 5: 27-32

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



About three or four times a year for about a year and a half now, Knox has hosted a small group of people affiliated to Moana Vā - a support organisation for Pasifika rainbow people. Because a number of the group find it difficult to attend churches that are critical of their sexuality, we've been able to offer them a space that is affirming - so they can worship God without fear of being othered. It's about provision of "safe" space. This year, because our first service was due to happen within Pride Month, notice of the service ended up featuring on a publicly circulated list of Pride events. It was one of two Christian worship events in the programme, the other event being hosted by an inclusive church not far from here.

Email from minister of the other church, to minister of Knox Church. Monday 17 February, 2025, 8:08pm.

Kia ora Matthew

Our parish has raised concerns regarding our pride service to be held on the 30th of March due to the current events that have occurred in Auckland. I am wondering if you are going to go on with yours at Knox.

Email from the minister of Knox Church to minister of other church.

Kia ora. At this point we don't see any reason to abandon our plans. Although our service will be happening during Pride Month, it's just another in a series of regular services we've been doing with Moana Vā for over a year now. We've never received any hostile visitors before.

Following the sending of the reply email, the minister of Knox Church does a re-think. Is he being naive? Are there health and safety issues he has yet to explore? As the Auckland Destiny Church people did indeed turn up to close down a book reading for children at the Te Atatu public library, were Christchurch Destiny people likely to turn up at Knox to close down our service? Was cancelation the responsible option?

A few days later, an email arrived from Moana Vā. Wednesday 19 February, 8:35am.

We have had a lot of interest in your nasty little sermon for Pride! I think we may get a few extra people from the Mainstream Rainbow Community especially with all the destiny church upset! People are feeling unsafe, but also allies are coming out the woodwork to support our community.

People are feeling unsafe. Allies are coming out of the woodwork. Should we cancel the event?

I think part of what inhabits me, as I think about this, is an expanding reluctance to let the agenda be set by bullies. To turn up to an event that is not for you, to make other people (including children) afraid, to chant loudly until everything has to stop, is the act of a bully. What do we do with the bully? Let them have their way?

-ooOoo-

The scene is a council meeting in Jerusalem. The High Priest is presiding. He says to the rag-tag group of Christians, including Peter the fisherman, "we gave you strict orders not to talk about Jesus, but that's exactly what you've done".

Strict orders were given. They were not obeyed - so now is a time of reckoning, where the disobedient are called to account. It's a proper exercising of power by an group properly vested with authority (is it?). Most certainly, this is how it's going to be understood by the High Priest and his people - and their wider culture. For the sake of social order, the disobedient just need to do what they're told.

There is another way of characterising it, though. And that is to retort "who gave you the right to be in charge of this?" You're in charge of some things, we grant you. But why are you in charge of **this**? We say to you, that we don't recognise your authority here. You obviously don't like what we're saying - but we don't think you have the right to silence us.

What do we call it when those of some power get bossy beyond what is proper, and order others around, when they have no right to? Do we call it **bullying**? Indeed, I see this Council meeting in Jerusalem as a case of exactly that - bullying. The text is full of the language of compulsion. "When they had **brought** them, they **had them stand** before the council. We gave

you **strict orders**. We did not **ask** you - we **told** you what to do. The language of compulsion - does it reveal the heart of the bully.

Peter's response, and the response of those who stand with him, is to say that the bully's authority does not bind them. The authority, if you call it that, is not accepted. "We must obey God", he says, "rather than any human authority". The early Christian response to this institutionalised act of bullying, is to dismiss the bully's authority, and to speak of another authority provided by the Christ who rose from the dead. You have no authority over us - because this strange risen One is our authority. Dare we say, in the shadow of bullying threats, "no, we will hold the service anyway".

Email to other church minister: Kia ora. At this point we don't see any reason to abandon our plans.

-ooOoo-

Those of you who are clever (and isn't that all of us) would notice that in the example of Knox holding a rainbow service when Destiny Church might prefer for the service not to be held, both groups would purport to be obeying God, rather than human authority. Both groups could provide some kind of theological justification for what they want - as indeed was true at the Council meeting in Jerusalem. Both parties to the argument had theologies, traditions, reasons for driving what they drove. Who is to say that one side is obeying God, while the other is not?

Well, as a preliminary answer to that I would ask "in the Te Atatu Library, who made the children cry? Who was shouting? Who was the bully? "We are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him". [Acts 5: 32]. Does the Holy Spirit sense in the shouting and the making afraid an obedience to God? Perhaps what we **do** is the test of what we **say** about who is obeying God.

-ooOoo-

It's the day after ANZAC Day, and our minds are rather fuller than usual with thoughts about war, and what it's for. While Gallipoli was a campaign from the war to end all wars, my mind goes now to the war that followed that - otherwise known as World War II. While the origins of that second war can be traced back to many complicated things about resolutions not properly thought through (like how Germany was ever going to cope with

the huge reparations loaded onto its shoulders), it is fairly widely accepted that a lot of that war's fuel came from someone who was a bully.

He had no authority over Poland, but took Poland anyway. Who put him in charge of Europe? By what authority did he do what he did? He comes only in power - not in love, respect or curiosity. What do we do with someone like that?

Well, in that decade what many governments did was go to war against him. Ours was one of those governments. Among us were those who believed that war was not the answer. We had people whose war effort was about stretcher bearing, humanitarian aid, working in various disobedient, bully-resisting ways for peace that didn't involve the taking up of arms. We also had people who resisted the bully by joining the armed forces, some of whom never came home. There was considerable public discourse about how a responsible war effort would work, and what it required in terms of different sacrifices and conscience.

I don't think anyone at that time though, thought that accepting the authority of the bully was a position to be taken.

-ooOoo-

It's the day after ANZAC Day, and while our minds **are** rather fuller than usual with thoughts about war, we also watch our current times.

Who are the bullies?

What feeds the power they wield?

Can their power really be called "authority"?

What is a holy response?

In the presence of silly tin gods, with their real damage and fear, what does it mean to serve the living God?

Maybe, in the fashion of Peter before the bullies of Jerusalem, we need to say "no, our authority comes from someone else".

Oooo, have we become renegades - or freedom fighters, or some strange other kind of category of person who is known only to the heart of God?

A moment of quiet.

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