

Sermon Archive 547

Sunday 3 August, 2025

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Peace Sunday

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Started in 2010 by Brandon Stanton, "Humans of New York" is a project that photographs people on the streets of New York City, and interviews them about what's on their minds. Stanton calls his project a kind of "photography census". Stanton never publishes the details of any of his interviewees, so I can't tell you who the person is whose photo is on the front page of the order of service. Here's the commentary that goes with the photo.



"It's a weird time. I've still got to get to work on time, pay my bills, manage chronic illness, all that stuff, while the world in general seems to be falling apart. It can be a challenge to juggle those two things while making sure one of them doesn't completely destroy my mental health. It's just an odd thing to be like: 'Oh, all of these atrocities are being committed in Gaza with

my tax dollars, but what am I going to eat for dinner?' Or: 'Trump just dismantled another check on his power. We're slowly sliding into fascism, he's winning at every turn, nobody's stopping him - but what concert should we go to this weekend?' The strangest part about the whole thing is that we've never been so connected. I could understand if this was eighty years ago; news travelled slowly. But now, in an instant, you get these facts, photos, videos. Verified by credible news, verified by aid organizations, verified by the United Nations — and nobody cares. Well, a lot of people care. But the people who can actually fix things: who can make a call, set up a meeting, post to millions of followers — they don't care. Instead of standing up for the voiceless, they'd rather lay low, keep their head down, cling to their money or status. So yeah, it's hard to be a person who cares right now. Sometimes you just want to melt into your bed or couch and be with your feelings. But I won't say that I feel hopeless. I'd never say that, because that's what they want — those people who only care about winning, who don't care about collateral damage. They want people to feel powerless. And I'm not going to give them that luxury. There are still reasons to be hopeful. Zohran just won the primary. And that's a sign of change, in New York City at least. Even the people who don't agree with his politics have to admit: his campaign was built on community. It wasn't funded by billionaires. It didn't pander to their interests. This was a campaign of a thousand people who volunteered, and canvassed, and made calls. Last week a lot of people who had been feeling powerless realized that they still have some power in this country. And that's a start. Let's just hope a lot more people are learning from that."

How would you describe the state of this human of New York? He's a strange mixture of being overwhelmed and refusing to be overwhelmed, of being dwarfed by the scale of the problem, and feeling strengthened by the company of other dwarfed people. He's clearly aware that things are structured in favour of the billionaires, but he's also captivated by the idea of "people power" . . . In the end, though, he's also keenly aware that his mental health is fragile - so he needs to be careful about picking fights.

Meanwhile, four and a half hours up the road, at Hamilton College, former President of the United States, Barrack Obama addresses an audience.

It is up to all of us to fix this. It's not going to be because somebody comes and saves you. The most important office in this democracy is the citizen, the ordinary person who says "no, that's not right".

I do think that one of the reasons that our commitment to democratic ideals has eroded, is that we got pretty comfortable and complacent. It has been easy during most of our lifetimes to say you are progressive, or say you are for social justice, or say you are for free speech, and not have to pay a price for it. And now we're at one of those moments where you know what? It's not enough just to say you're for something. You may actually have to do something and possibly sacrifice a little bit.

So yeah, if you're a law firm being threatened, you might have to say, "okay, we will lose some business because we're going to stand for a principle". If you are a university, you may have to figure out, are we in fact doing things right? Have we in fact violated our own values, our own code, violated the law in some fashion? If not, and you're just being intimidated, well you should be able to say "Well, that's why we got this big endowment. No, we'll stand up for what we believe in and then we'll pay our researchers for a while - out of that endowment and will give up the extra wing or the fancy gymnasium - yeah we can that we can delay that for a couple years - because, you know, academic freedom might be a little more important."

*For most of human history, and to this day in most places in the world, there **is** a cost to challenging the powers-that-be, particularly if they are abusing that power. And this idea, and I've noticed this among some wealthier folks who, you know, after George Floyd, they were right there, and a bunch companies were talking about how they cared about diversity and they wanted to do "this" and they were all for "that" - and they're mute right now. But what that tells me is it was okay when it was cool and trendy. And when it's not? Not so much. And that, I think, is what we have to, each of us, has to examine in our own hearts. We say we're for equality, are we willing to fight for it? Are we going to risk something for it? We say that we're for the rule of law. Are we going to stick to that when it's tough, not when it's easy?*

It is up to all of us to fix this. Well, some of us just need to pay our bills and melt into our beds.

So, we will come back to this . . .

Reading: Matthew 9: 35-38

Reflection: Praying for labourers

Jesus looks at the crowds, and he feels for them. To him, they look "harassed and helpless" - translated by some scholars as "wounded and lying exhausted". It seems that a lot of the crowd is melting into its bed or couch. I wonder what the problem is. I guess they're all living in a country that's occupied by a foreign power. Their old political structures have been emasculated - allowed to remain in place, but not really as anything with any power. We're not Roman, they think, but now are required to be. This doesn't sit well with us - there's a sickness in the soul (forced to be what we are not), fed by a sense of "no, this isn't right", fed by a sense of being, in terms of caring, outnumbered - outnumbered . . .

Indeed, the trouble is, for the compassionate Jesus (who's still full of drive and power), that there's only one of him. Yes, he's an immensely capable "one" - such that miracles pop out of him, and people say of him "yes, the kingdom has come close". But all this remarkable, maybe divine aptitude, doesn't cause him to assess the challenge as anything less than huge. Can he do it alone? So far he has, but now? Is this in fact something that can be done alone?

We suspect not, for he says to his disciples "the harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest." That's an interesting way to put it. He doesn't say "come and follow me", "become a labourer". He says pray to God that labourers might be made. How are labourers made? Through the winning of heart and mind? Through the nurturing of our better instincts? Through sitting with those who have melted into their beds? It's not so much a call to activism. It's a prayer for the formation of a conscience, the formation of a soul.

Is it a spiritual practice that later will grow into mobilising? Striving? Questioning? Growing in capacity to respond in the world compassionately. Hoping. Protesting. Forgiving. Peace-making - once something has been made . . .

It's Peace Sunday, and we hear the call to pray for the formation of more labourers in the field.

Prayers will come from this, but for now we keep a moment of quiet.