

Sermon Archive 550

Sunday 24 August, 2025

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reflection on new priorities

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Lesson: Luke 13: 10-17

Introduction to a Hymn:

For the young women of Rangi Ruru, here's a wee word about how I structure the services here at Knox. There's a list of Bible readings, put together by a group of people from across the different denominations - the Anglicans, the Methodist, the Catholics, the Presbyterians - and others. Each Sunday has a choice of four readings. So at the start of the process of organising a service, I look at the four readings, see which one seems to be speaking, and I throw the other three away. They can wait until next time.

Once I've spent time with the interesting reading, I'll come up with a sermon. Sometimes, in the writing of the sermon, I'll have a couple of ideas, which I try to squeeze into my self-imposed limit of 1500 words. If I've got too many ideas to squeeze in, I throw most of them away. You can't say everything, and if the thrown away idea is any good, it'll get used some other time. For now, it can wait until later.

The next thing I do is find hymns that reflect the theme of the sermon. I don't like speaking in one direction, then singing in the opposite direction. Things ought to integrate. An example? This morning the reading features a woman who couldn't stand up straight. She was quite bent over - until Jesus enabled her to stand up tall. A hymn that seemed to fit well was Margaret Kouvelis's "Stand tall in Christ". It's a celebration of standing tall in the dignity that God gives. It's an affirmation of the healing of hurts, and the birthing of hope. And its composer is a nice woman - who used to visit Knox when her son (now moved to Dunedin) used to worship here. I reckon it's just the hymn to sing.

But now I consider the time, and how much we need to do today, I think it can wait. We'll sing it some other time.

If that makes you feel frustrated (slightly cheated), then hang onto that. The sermon may speak to that feeling.

Sermon: You'll just have to wait.

After a very long time of dealing with not being able to stand up straight, a woman comes to the notice of Jesus. I'm not sure that Jesus knows, but we, to whom the story is told know that she's been waiting eighteen years - longer than some of you have been alive. The day comes, the day goes - the year comes, the year goes, still unable to stand.

Without any fuss, really, Jesus says to her "from your ailment, you are set free". And she is. She stands up straight, and gives thanks to God.

Whereupon some experts in religion point out to Jesus that today is the Sabbath, and he shouldn't have healed on the Sabbath. There are six other days coming, which are perfectly good for healing. This healing **could** have waited. If Jesus had understood God properly, then it **should** have waited. That's what the experts say.

Let's climb into the head of those who are told to wait for what they need while other things take precedence. This time that was given to you was mis-given. It should have been used differently - while you just waited. Inside your head, inside your heart, how does this feel? I suggest it makes you feel like you are not very important. Priority races on to way ahead of us to embrace other people or things, or practices, while we languish here. I suspect that as eighteen years have passed her by without any mercy or cure, she's got used to feeling unimportant - overlooked. And here, to confirm it, are the experts saying that her healing was not a priority - should have waited.

Jesus becomes indignant. He calls them hypocrites, points out that any one of them, if finding one of their **animals** thirsty on the Sabbath, would do the decent thing and lead it to water. They wouldn't wait. And we're told that the bloody-obviousness of this truth makes the experts feel ashamed. Good job!

Jesus then speaks of the woman just healed, calling her a "daughter of Abraham" - a description of great dignity and value. It's as if he knows she's been devalued by their suggestion that she should wait for more important things to be done, and he restores her sense of being worthy by giving her a description of honour.

Told to wait - hearing "I am not important" - then enabled to stand tall in Christ - hearing again that God confers significance, dignity, worth. She is not unimportant. In the scheme of God's assessment, she counts.

Here's an excerpt from a letter that American Civil Rights leader, Martin Luther King wrote when he was detained in a prison cell in Birmingham, Alabama, 1963. He'd been arrested for disobeying a court order (Judge W.A. Jenkins)

prohibiting "parading, demonstrating, boycotting, trespassing and picketing". Martin's church colleagues had counselled him not to break the court order - and to find some other way, later, to advance his cause. They did not join him in the protest. And this is what Martin wrote in reply to them:

For years now I have heard the word "Wait!" It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This "Wait" has almost always meant 'Never.'

We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights. Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging dark of segregation to say, "Wait." But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television . . . ; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading "white" and "coloured"; when your first name becomes "nigger," your middle name becomes "boy" (however old you are) and your wife and mother are never given the respected title "Mrs."; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodiness" then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait . . . I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience.

I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Councillor or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season".

That's what Martin wrote.

Are there other groups of people, do you think, who are being told to wait, while God longs for them to be free? Are there other healings that could happen today, but don't because we're preferring something ultimately less important? Are there liberties we can't see as necessary, now, because we still need to hear the words of Jesus: "Woman, you are set free".

I close with a text written by John Bell.

1. Heaven shall not wait
for the poor to lose their patience,
the scorned to smile, the despised to find a friend:
Jesus is Lord;
he has championed the unwanted;
in him injustice confronts its timely end.
2. Heaven shall not wait
for the rich to share their fortunes,
the proud to fall, the élite to tend the least:
Jesus is Lord;
he has shown the master's privilege -
to kneel and wash servants' feet before they feast.
3. Heaven shall not wait
for triumphant Hallelujahs,
when earth has passed and we reach another shore:
Jesus is Lord
in our present imperfection;
his power and love are for now; and then for evermore.

Ooo, in our order of service, we reach an unusual thing - never seen it before. It says "An empty space".

Shall we fill it with something we said could wait. Not waiting till later, impatient for what is important, we stand tall in God's new priority, and together we sing - "Stand tall in Christ".