

Sermon Archive 558

Sunday 2 November, 2025

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reading: Ephesians 1: 11-23

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



A few years ago, the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand re-structured its superannuation scheme. In response to howls of protest across the country from people who'd been paying into the scheme for decades, suggesting that the changes weren't fair, the church organised for each contributor to the fund to have a consultation with an accredited financial advisor. And so it was that I found myself in a basement room in Cashmere, talking to Joesph. Joseph wore a blue suit and tan coloured shoes. I don't know what kind of car he drove. I have to say that I found our meeting useful.

"OK, Matthew (says Joseph); we can't work out how long your retirement might be, because you know, sometimes the wheels of the bus just come - and other times we wait a long time safely to the side of the road". Joseph tried to do some forecasting within this uncertainty by asking me whether I drink or smoke, and whether [quote/unquote] longevity runs in my family. More under his fingers than the days that were written for me in God's book, is how much money I'm likely to be working with by the time I turn 65. Joseph quizzes me on my savings, my assets, the current investments I have, whether my monthly credit card balance is something of which I am proud or ashamed. I answer his all his questions with relative ease.

Then he asks me whether I am likely to inherit wealth from my parents - and if so, when. I don't enjoy this invitation to consider the death of my parents, but I know that it's Joseph's job to ask me about it.

My response to him goes something like this: I don't know what Mum and Dad are worth; but I've never felt it wise to consider their wealth as part of my planning. Either one of them might require expensive medical care in later life, and that's where their money should go. It's **their** money, not mine. I prefer to build my future not on expectations of inheritance. I'll build my future on my own work and diligent saving. Indeed, for a long time now, I've taken some pride in making my own way in the world.

Joseph heard what I said, and we made my plans accordingly. Inheritance was not something to be factored in. I choose not to rely on inheritance.

Not relying on inheritance!? Because my parents worked hard and saved well, I grew up in a warm, dry house. Because my parents loved each other, and drew that love around the three children they made, I grew up without anxiety. Because my parents were honest and decent people, honesty and decency are default positions for me - not that I fall to them immediately, but I certainly know when I've departed from them. Because my parents had funny little mannerisms and turns of phrase, I express myself the way I do.

The truth is that I face the future as the person I am, in large part because I have inherited these things from my parents. I did not earn them. They were given to me. The proud, independent creature stands on his own two feet, and says "I need no inheritance". **He already has inherited.** Sometimes it is forgotten that inheritance is not simply about money - it is about the good (and sometimes about the bad), about the blessing (and sometimes about the curse) that we already have received.

-ooOoo-

"We have received an inheritance", writes the author of Ephesians. The writer goes on to describe this wonderful life-giving event of richness and beauty - like some kind of spinning orb in the sky of our hope. It's full of grace and forgiveness. It's full of completeness and peace. It brims with love, and has such movement in its orbit that, like some spirited gravity, it draws in first the lucky, and then truly anyone who comes close.

On the stage of history, this wonderful thing is the life of Jesus. On the stage of cosmology, it's the emerging of the Eternal Word who was from the beginning. On the stage of the meaning and the value of all things, it's reconciliation of all-that-is through the love and life shared through the Spirit of God. There it is!

The writer says "we were the first to receive from it, and find ourselves renewed in hope. Then **you**, when **you** had heard the word of truth, joined in. And this is just the beginning - a pledge of what is to come. What is to come is this understanding (given to those whose "eyes of the heart" have been opened) that anyone who believes has a glorious inheritance among the saints. God waits, with love, just to bestow it.

I think more often than not, when we hear the expression "saint", we **do** manage not to fall, utterly naively, into stained glass parodies of people. We acknowledge that among the saints there are those who belch and fart, and sometimes get grumpy. But still, there's something about our English expression "saintly" that always pushes us towards a sort of merit-based thinking. The saints are those who did miracles. They were those who were wonderfully brave. They were people who in the realm of piety or believing or praying **excelled**. In a way, these are God's **achievers**.

How close is this to what we considered earlier? The self-made person, standing on its own two feet, proudly independent, saying "**I** have worked at this. This is **my** doing." It's never quite that crass, since we do moderate it a bit through our theologies of pride being a sin, something of an impediment to Christian character. **But still**, lingering on in our thinking is this Christian Exceptionalism, this sense that holiness is an achievement!

Here, though, is a different approach. Saints are those who simply have come into contact with something that is full of life - contact with something that is truly beautiful, something that **shares** its life and richness. Something the writer of Ephesians calls "an inheritance" . . . not a wage, not a right, not an achievement . . . an inheritance.

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The story is called "Great Expectations", and the one whose expectations are being explored is a young man called Pip. Having come from a pretty poor household which provided only the basics, the mystery to be solved is where the money has come from to keep Pip like a gentleman - good lodgings, nice clothes, opportunity to move among the privileged. The working theory, because it makes most sense given the limited information, is that the money must have come from the wealthy Miss Haversham. She's a bitter old bag, who hasn't once managed to say anything nice about Pip, or make him feel good about himself. In fact she has found ways to hurt him. But she's got plenty of dollars - so cuts the most plausible profile as a benefactor. It's sort of a matter of the maths. The spreadsheet suggests that **she** is the one who's blessing him.

Spoiler alert: the money isn't coming from Miss Haversham. It's coming from Magwitch, who is grateful for the help that Pip, as a boy, had given him when he was on the run from the law. Pip's inheritance had not come from the figure of fiscal plenty and emotional cold. It had come from

someone who was grateful for a small kindness. The inheritance comes not because the cold-hearted barn is overflowing. It comes from a place of gratitude.

Here's one family's experience of inheritance. A few generations back, this argument erupted over who should have custody of a photo album. The album contained photos of people from this part of the family, and also from that part. A sensible approach might have been to form two albums, with this part's photos in one, and that part's in another. Alas, some photos featured people from each part of the family together. Rather than this be testament to family togetherness (different part captured together as being together), it became disputed territory. An unimpressed judge at the court house gave ownership of the album to one part of the family, and told the whole family that they were a waste of court time. Somehow, fallout from that dispute means that to this day, my great grandfather and great grandmother are buried (no gravestones provided) in different sections of Waikumete Cemetery.

A descendant of that particular fight now sometimes tells her children that she doesn't want to get expensive work done on the house, because that will squander their inheritance. Each child assures her, harkening back to earlier in this sermon, that we don't need an inheritance - and indeed, already have inherited the really important things. It's **your** money - not ours. Please don't think of us. She continues to think of us, of course, because she loves us and wants to provide for us. And probably that's another expression of the true inheritance. It comes not necessarily from plenty. It comes from love.

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What makes a saint? A saint is made when an ordinary human being is drawn into the influence of a great love that already is present. A saint is made when a life is drawn into the orbit of **the** life. A saint is made when confronted with the love of all loves. Generation after generation finds the love . . . because it is in the nature of God to love and to give that love away. It's a matter of inheritance.

A moment of quiet.

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