

Sermon Archive 600

Sunday 23 August, 2026

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reflections on 600 Sermons

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Introduction: Too much!

The year is either 1987 or 1988 and the Rev. Professor Peter Matheson, one of the teachers at the Theological Hall, Dunedin, is fulfilling one of his professional responsibilities by attending a public service of worship at First Church, to critique the performance of one of his students - one Matthew Jack. Matthew is 24 or 25 years old. It's an evening service, commonly attended by hardly anyone. It's held in a corner of the church.

Peter's report notes that, for the quiet evening devotions, Matthew included four Bible readings, five hymns and prayers that were thoroughly and diligently Trinitarian in structure and scope. The poor little congregation was bombarded by everything the reformed tradition had at its disposal, including a sermon that tried to cover everything ever recorded as having had been expressed about God or by God, ever!

Peter's advice to the nervously thorough Matthew, was "too much! There will be other times when you can speak of other things", he said. "Just settle, young man". And he gave me a B+, or something like that - I can't remember.

-ooOoo-

In my first parish (probably about 282 sermons - wasn't counting), I was chosen to be part of a small group of Presbyterian ministers to spend time with a celebrated Christian communicator. The communicator encouraged me to think about my garage door, and how I could use it as a metaphor to augment the old kingdom metaphors dreamed up by Jesus. Everyone has a garage door, he said. And we were also encouraged to gather jokes to make the gospel more entertaining. Also a member of the group - a wise, slightly measured older minister of great tremendous brain, whose facial expression I couldn't quite work out - I'm not sure it was incredulity or derision - that the rich metaphors from the mind Jesus ought to be replaced with anecdotes about a garage door in Blockhouse Bay!

In the second parish (287 sermons), sermons and prayers began to be formed by a sense that while some things in our community were right, some things were definitely out of kilter. I was no longer speaking into a neutral space. The Word needed not simply to be interesting - it needed to search the heart - because some of our hearts

were in wrong places - depravity and crime. Who is God to the victim? Who is God to the criminal? Four Bible readings, five hymns and a garage door weren't touching it.

In the third parish (316 sermons), to my dismay and liberation, I found peace with the person in the pulpit. At the "coming out", I felt like I finally had a true space from which to speak, but ironically had lost the right to speak. The prayers were more honest, the sermon came from a more peaceful place - but church law labelled it the work of someone who wasn't worthy of the task. Church policy shepherded me into a wilderness of silence. No word from you, thank you.

In the next ministry (46 sermons), it was said that the sermons sat well in the university chapel, but that the College had more important tasks for the preacher - in the writing of rosters and policies and the running of fire drills. A great re-deployment was imposed, and preaching fell away.

In the fourth parish (the favourite one - don't tell the others), on Sunday 23 August, the preacher delivered his 600th sermon to the long-suffering people of Ōtautahi. The number gave him cause to think about the source, the place, the purpose and the hope of the sermon. And so, two readings (not four) and two short reflections on how we are fed (or not) by the Word. What are we listening for, as we gather for a sermon?

Lesson: Isaiah 55: 1-3a, 8-11

Reflection: Do words still work?

At one point, some years ago, in the wider "church and culture" world, the idea was floated of the demise of the sermon. In a media-saturated landscape of compressed sound bites, reduced concentration spans, flashing lights and entertainment, various church growth gurus encouraged us to give up on the hopelessly old fashioned practice of one person speaking to a group. The format is dead, they said. At the time, I wondered if it wasn't in fact true.

But then I thought about the people who are closest to me, from whom I have drawn love, support, food for my life. How have I engaged with them? For the purposes of avoiding public discomfort, we won't go to the language of touch. We acknowledge simply that our deepest relationships, our profoundest sense of not being alone, come through spoken word. We talk to one another - and in so doing, we share who we are, what we hope, how we fit together. I speak, you listen. You speak, I listen - and shared life comes. To speak and to listen is at once very basic, primitive even, but also the basis on which two become one. The spoken word, the sharing of thought through it, may be old fashioned. It may lack noise, and shout-in-your-face sudden impact. But it is that by which we cease to be alone. The significance of a spoken word, spoken in love, cannot be over-estimated.

Isaiah speaks of a Word that comes, like rain from heaven, that waters the earth, and never returns to heaven until it has done its work. What's the work? To water, to bring life, to create growth, and bread and nourishment. The Word comes to bring life.

The Word also is nothing solely available to the moneyed and privileged. The call goes out to all people, rich or poor: "come, you who have no money, come, buy and eat. Come, for here nothing has a price. Listen, eat what is good, so that you may live."

There is a deep, rich vein of wisdom, learned by the people of God over thousands of years. There is a simplicity in which it is described - simple as the rain. And I have images of Jesus in conversation. The woman at the well; Nicodemus at night; Zacchaeus in the tree; John at the cross; Peter by the lake. These are life-forming conversations between characters in the play - the Word expressed through words. Is the sermon dead?

If it *is*, then God bless you for putting up with 600 of them!

I long have started my sermons with the prayer that the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts might be acceptable to God. That was the prayer that minister number two (Very Rev. Neil Churcher) used at Knox Church, Ōtepoti. Before that, minister number one (Rev. Sam McCay) used to pray the following: break the Word of Life to us, O God, that hungering and thirsting after righteousness, we might be filled". It's a prayer for the satisfying of the hungering soul.

"Incline your ear", says Isaiah, "and come to me; listen, so that you may live." Listen, so that you may live.

Music for Reflection

Lesson: Luke 4: 14-19

Reflection: Why do we seek the Word of Life?

Near the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus took upon himself the task of Spirit-speaking to the poor, the captive, the blind and the oppressed. That proved to be a good and faithful place to start. It was as if he knew that people (fortunate ones and unfortunate ones alike) need to hear a Word of Life. Healing, liberating, enabling, growing, comforting.

In the year 2011, I was attending the Presbyterian Church in Ōpoho. At this time the church was looking for a minister, so was what we delightfully describe in Presbyterian parlance call "in vacancy". It certainly wasn't completely vacant - there were still people there. But without a resident minister, the Parish Council kept Sunday mornings ticking over by inviting speakers from various Christian

organisations to fill the pulpit. We heard a lot about the work of the Leprosy Mission, the Tear Fund, Support Services Otago, Christian World Service - all of whom were doing good work in the community. We heard ***much*** about their good work. It kept the pulpit full.

At the time, I was feeling anxious about my fight with Immigration NZ to get someone I thought I loved into the country. It was also becoming clear that I my job was about to be disestablished, and that my future was uncertain. I would have loved to have gone to church, and found some comfort there, a word of reassurance, rather than a report about the social work of a worthy institution. Why do we seek the Word of Life? Comfort? For comfort, let's preach 600 sermons.

While I ***have*** had times of vulnerability, there have been plenty of other times when I've felt strong. In times of strength, when we are winning more than we are losing, what do we do seek from the Word? Some strong people, in their strength, run mad over the weak. Others have presence of mind to consider how strength can be offered, shared kindly in the world under the ordering of God's fiery heart for justice and compassion. Does the Word speak into that? If so, for the calling on the conscience of the powerful, let's preach 600 sermons.

It is said that people benefit from feeling that they are part of something larger than themselves. An example might be to set our story within the larger several thousand year story of people who knew that they were not alone, but were living in the narrative arc of the larger world of God. Abraham is called, Moses is burned, the Exodus people journey, the prophets cry, the Christ is born, flame and wind come upon people like us, eyes turn to eternity. Is today's way-finding given direction by wider currents? If so, let's hear about it - let's preach 600 sermons.

Finally, under the stars, some star-gazing dreamers ask "what are human beings that you care for us?" ***Is*** there a love enfolding the whole structure of things - such that each one of us can see our placement in the world as something friendly, not hostile, something living, not dying, something where we are not aliens, but people planting our grapevines and settling in . . . Who are we? Where is our home? Is this life a gift?

Why do we seek the Word of Life? Comfort, challenge, fitting into the story, knowing that we are fearfully and wonderfully made? The soul listens for the Word of Life - so let's preach 600 sermons!

I am honoured to have done so in this house of prayer, for this pilgrim people. By God's grace, next week maybe we'll welcome number 601.

We keep a moment of quiet.

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