

Sermon Archive 476

Sunday 17 March, 2024

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

"Covenant with heart"

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



A Reflection on the Front Page Photo (photo can be found on the front page of the order of service)

The heart is writ large on the world - larger than the wee people who walk the pattern. The pattern is functioning as a labyrinth - an windy path which various mystics have used as a spiritual reflection - walking the journey set out, praying along the way, finding God in the measured keeping of the pattern and movement along the path.

One of the figures seems to be moving - the left arm swung out to the back, left knee lifted to show continued momentum. The other figure seems to have stopped - looking down at the ground just before him / her. Not that there's anything on the ground to be observed (that we can see from here). No barrier obvious. Is this just a pause that makes sense from within, that we (from without) can never see? Such may be the private experience of walking around the pattern of the heart.

Initially I feel (though I don't have wide enough an angle to be sure), that these walkers are never going to connect - because the lines of the heart they're walking seem never to cross. The walking one has a shorter route that is his own. The pausing one has a longer route (is that why he / she is pausing?) - the longer journey must needs be slower and more punctuated by pause?

I feel sad that these two won't meet, since they're both on a journey of the heart - and we who journey the heart surely are meant to meet one another.

But ah! As I inspect the centre of the heart pattern, I see something new. From the heart of the heart, I follow the line, and I see by my progress past the first three points at the bottom of the heart, that indeed this is a concentric pattern - a spiral. The path of these two walkers are in fact one. They are bound to meet.

And it's interesting too, seeing the direction of the walkers, now that I know they'll meet, that the one who is walking with energy, rather than stalling, is the one who already has been to the centre of the heart. The one who knows the centre of the heart, walks a way that will meet the one who's rather more tired - or hesitant - or frozen - or resting in God - and bring to the meeting something rather quite full of Spirit. What do you think they'll do, or say, or feel, or hope, when they meet?

What a fine shape is this labyrinth of the heart! If I were going to write a covenant, I would write it on the heart.

Hymn: Blest are the pure in heart

A Reading: Jeremiah 31: 31-34

Reflection: Covenant with Heart

Time frames! The stories of Abraham and Sarah are told by their descendants, who've had lots of time to reflect on the significance of their lives for those who followed. Who they were, and how we're meant to reflect on them are kind of generated in the spirit of "when gods strode the earth". It sits on the cusp of the realm of pre-history. That being said, historians reckon that the real Abraham from Haran, and his wife Sarah, probably lived and breathed around the years 2166 BCE. The same historians put the date of the Exodus at 1446 BCE - roughly 700 years later. That's only maths; more important is what happened to an evolving people during those centuries. They'd become numerous (in keeping with the covenant promise). They'd fallen into slavery in Egypt (which put pressure on their belief in the covenant promise). On their long walk to freedom, they'd been fed with manna in the wilderness (in keeping with the covenant promise). And they'd fallen into being bitten by snakes (putting pressure on the covenant promise). And last week, in our sermon, we pondered how that last "experience of suffering" kind of broke of camel's back. The people wondered whether the covenant hadn't maybe fallen apart. Under the promise of the covenant God, here we are, dying. So the covenant isn't well.

It was well, of course; and some strange engagement with a snake on a stick enabled the people again to believe for a wee bit longer that they were held within covenant love. Humanity said "maybe the covenant isn't working", and God said "no, indeed it is".

Now, it's another 700 years later, and Jeremiah (the prophet of God) is listening to what God may be saying. And Jeremiah reckons that God now is asking the same question that the people asked 700 years earlier. God's asking "is this working?" Because, so it seems to God, maybe it's not. Lacking is humanity's sense of fidelity. Lacking is any sense that the people even think that God is present. Lacking is any natural sign that the people are loving being loved. So, of course, Jeremiah's God is beginning to have to admit that it's probably not working.

-ooOoo-

God says to the prophet Jeremiah "now I'm going to make a new covenant - not like the old one which your ancestors broke". You don't replace the old with

something new, if you still believe in the old one. If you make a new one, you're admitting the old one didn't work.

But while when the people realised it wasn't working, they might have walked away, when *God* realises it isn't working, God ponders (for the sake of the covenant people who still are loved) something that might work better. And what might work better, it seems, is for the covenant not to remain in the realm of words, but to find a home in the human heart.

-ooOoo-

As God writes these ancient old words of love onto something called human heart, you can kind of see why.

If the heart's not involved, then it's always going to be kind of formal, maybe then perfunctory - more like a duty than a delight. If it's about living as one, unity in covenant, it's got to have heart. Following the fall of apartheid in South Africa, the point was made by Desmond Tutu and many, that a change in law wasn't going to transform a nation. The law was important, but more important was the fostering (through truth and reconciliation) of a new relationship under that law between those who had been strangers or enemies. A new statute in a book would only ever have grammar (rather than life, goodness, new love) if it just stayed on paper. The vital thing was for the spirit of the law to find a home in the hearts of the people. You can't legislate love.

So you can kind of understand what *God* is saying - when replacing the old thing that wasn't working, with something to do with the heart. The heart is a basic, fundamental receiving of love. It's in the heart that connections are made that never can be made by law - even if that law is covenant law.

In the illustrious words of the prophets Alicia Keys, "I can't make you love me, if you don't".

In an attempt to find a covenant that will work, God moves to the realm of the human heart.

*"Batter my heart, three-person'd God, for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.
I, like an usurp'd town to another due,
Labour to admit you, but oh, to no end;
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,
But is captiv'd, and proves weak or untrue."*

John Donne - Holy Sonnets

Knox Singers

A Reading: John 12: 20-33

Reflection: The First Writing on the Heart

If it were to be agreed that God's new covenant was to be written on human hearts, one might be inclined to think the first significant writing of the new covenant was on the heart of Jesus - who said that *his* now was strangely troubled.

For from his heart, he begins to speak of seeds falling into the ground and dying. He talks about loving life, and hating life, and giving life, and finding life. He talks about casting out the Destroyer, and the drawing of all people to himself. And as he does this, the one writing of him says this is all about describing the death that he will die. This is strange and intense stuff - with which we sit, rather than try to explain.

It's just as if Jesus knows that when we move from words to the matter of the heart, the stakes are different. When the heart is involved, so also involved are feelings, hurt, regret, denial. So also are tears, longings, attacks to the heart.

If you love more, you hurt more. If you make it about the heart, it draws us in so close - so close that we can jab the dagger, hammer the nail, wonder why we're being betrayed with a kiss.

Jesus says to Jeremiah, as the prophet speaks of moving from word to heart, "be careful what you wish for" - for the Passion . . . for the Passion . . . for the Passion.

-ooOoo-

Two little figures do their labyrinth walk around the shape of the heart. They will meet one another - one of them having already been to the heart of the heart. What will they say? What will they do? How will they be - these walkers of the heart?

As we move one week further into our Season of the Covenant, the heart is getting involved.

May God keep us safe on this journey - as things become real.

We keep a moment of quiet.

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