

Sermon Archive 482

Sunday 28 April, 2024

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Two Reflections: Water and Vine

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



The First Lesson: Acts 8: 26-40

The First Reflection: What's to stop me from being baptised?

I went to visit Arthur Maddock at the Howick Baptist Home when he was very old and not speaking much - well, not speaking at all. Arthur had been the minister of St Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Howick in 1963, when I was three months old and my parents had taken me to church to be baptised. Arthur had taken me in his arms, sprinkled me with water, invoked the three-fold name of God, and declared me to have been received into the nurturing life of Christ's body, the vine of many branches, the Church. No reports circulate about my having cried loudly or having urinated on the minister, so I imagine I did neither of those things. What I *did* do, however, was to be taken home where I was surrounded by love but brought up in what you might call a church-free environment. Arthur probably never saw me again, before he moved from Howick to his next parish appointment in Levin, Manawatu. In Arthur's memory, I probably joined the multitude of nameless, faceless ones who constituted the great cloud of the "baptismally indifferent", the leaves that had way blown down the back of the garden.

About sixteen years after my baptism, when Arthur had retired to Pakuranga, and started working there as an honorary pastoral visitor at the Pakuranga church, I visited the Howick church to run by his successor some comparative religious questions. It was at that point that the faith of the church (promised as nurture to me) activated. Faith formed - sort of. Worship became my practice. Discipleship became something to which I aspired.

Some time later, when I was probably near the middle of my ten years in my second parish, I heard that Arthur was in the Howick Baptist Hospital and significantly unwell. Having myself, by then, baptised many babies who then disappeared (leaves blown down the bottom of the garden), and having each time experienced a degree of disappointment about that (where did they go, why couldn't we nurture them?), I determined that I would visit Arthur, explaining who I was and what I'd experienced in ministry, how I'd become a fellow baptiser.

So I told him of the first baptism I did, brand new at Blockhouse Bay - how at the age of twenty nine, with not a single baby in my family, I felt terrified at being asked

to hold one in front of a large group and not drop her while working the water and preparing myself to feel hurt if she cried. By then I hadn't had the experience of trying to baptise a little Australian whose over-pronounced tutoring in "stranger danger" caused him to run from me, shouting "no, go away bad man". Nor had I had the experience of doing a full immersion baptism for someone entering a new phase of life in which Christian identity was a wonderful treasure.

I couldn't tell Arthur those last few stories, because by then they hadn't yet happened. But that was all right. Mostly I just wanted to thank him for doing what he did in 1963, and to let him know that what he had done in hope and faith, in time, had found some kind of fulfilment in who I had become - someone, who by the nurturing of the Church, had come to see life as a gift from the God revealed through the Spirit, in Jesus Christ, whom I wished to follow and serve.

So that's what I told him. For *his* part, he just stared at me - for as I said, by then he wasn't saying much. He died a few weeks later.

-ooOoo-

On the road that goes from Jerusalem down to Gaza, Philip meets someone to whom tradition has given the name "Simon the black". Good old tradition, innocently choosing labels designed to describe by ending up dividing - without suspecting that its language reveals its blind-spots. Let's us call him what the Bible does - "the Ethiopian". The Ethiopian is reading Jewish scripture - a passage from Isaiah, and has been on something of a spiritual pilgrimage - up to Jerusalem, God's own city. There is clearly some questing in faith - some religious enquiry, some trying out of what it feels like to be in a worshipping people. (Is this me? Does it make sense? How does it feel? What am I making of the weird old texts resting in my hands? Who is the sheep described as being led to the slaughter? Is this a story to which I belong?)

And now, on his way home to Ethiopia, by some kind of "breathing of the Spirit", he finds a companion by his side: Philip, who's willing to engage, to try to open up the scriptures, to speak of who the Christ is for him.

We don't know anything about Philip's spiritual style - whether he was gentle or pushy - other than that he was moved by the Spirit. We don't know whether he was very good at listening, or had a reassuring cadence in his voice. What we **do** know is that whatever style he had, it connected for the Ethiopian, who obviously felt nurtured by it. Water is spied off to the side of the road. We have water. We have faith. We have someone willing to receive a student of spirit; what's to stop a baptism? What more do we need?

It seems that there is nothing more to be needed - because Philip goes down to the water with his new friend in Christ, and baptises him. This Ethiopian person, noted in the text to be a eunuch, becomes part of the body of Christ.

I wonder, as he came up from the water, did he marvel at how he had been received. I wonder if his being received in good faith by Philip contrasted at all with the Law he probably had read in Deuteronomy 23: "No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall come into the assembly of the Lord".

The old faith had an answer to his question "what is to prevent me from being baptised?" It came up with a problem - a reason to reject. The new faith had no such restriction.

In his book "Jesus, the Bible and Homosexuality: explode the myths, heal the Church", Jack Rogers from the Fuller Theological Seminary in California, writes: "the fact that the first Gentile convert to Christianity is from a sexual minority and a different race, ethnicity and nationality altogether" calls Christians to be radically inclusive and welcoming. The Spirit opens doors, not closes them. Christian faith is to be open, creative, uncomplicated in its answer to the question: what is to prevent me from being part of the body of Christ?

We note, of course, that it was in Ethiopia, the destination of the journey on which this traveller was baptised, that one of the world's oldest Christian communities was established. The Ethiopian was not one of Arthur's babies who disappear. He became a builder of community and faith. Rejected by the old faith, he is nurtured to nurture the new one. Destined in the old faith always to be a reject or special dispensation, or included because people are willing to turn a "blind eye", in the new faith he simply is a baptised (welcomed) person of faith

So **we** ask "What is to prevent **us** from being baptised? Philip looks at us, and says "nothing is to prevent you - absolutely nothing".

The Gospel Lesson: John 15: 1-8

The Second Reflection: Life in the vine

In a recent sermon (about a shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep), a colleague of mine expressed his thoughts about why Kiwis go to war. He asked, when we, in shepherd mode, are moved to "defend the sheep by putting ourselves into protective, self-sacrificial positions", who or what exactly do we perceive as the "sheep" that need protecting? My colleague, who has gone into theatres of war, admitted that he didn't think he would go into war thinking greatly of our King and the honour of the throne. (That's not the sheep.) Rather, he would go into war thinking of his family and friends, and of the precious community life to which he would return when the war was over. Speaking of that life, and the peculiar characteristics of it here, he thought of the putting down of a hangi, the enjoyment of the bush and beach, the watching of favourite sports, the spying in the sky of the Southern Cross. It's a way of life, my colleague

reckons, familiar to us, and beloved. That's what he would carry in his heart and mind when going to war - the way of life.

Quite often, of course, our beloved way of life is not immediately threatened by war - although it might be a domino in a set of dominos that could fall further down the line. Often we go to war to help friends abroad, with whom culturally or historically we feel some connection - to stand up for some broad set of values or principles. Sometimes we go because we've made certain political or military agreements that we feel, sometimes even reluctantly, we need to honour.

But my colleague's thoughts about defending a "way of life" got me thinking about what kind of life I feel is worth defending.

-ooOoo-

There is a kind of life that might be described as "living in the vine". In it, I find life coming to me from a source I don't quite understand - and I can't point to it as if it's a "thing" in the world. It's more like all the rest of life around me - the vine of which I am a branch. It is like me, in that it lives, and it grows fruit, as I can grow fruit. It's productive, as I (in my better moments) am productive. It moves in the wind, it grows in the rain and the sun. It changes form, but in substance stays the same. And when part of it dies, part of me dies also. It has seasons. It has the capacity to ramble and grow in weird directions indeed, were it not for the care of the vine grower who knows gently and skilfully, with a keen eye and delicate hand, how to prune away what might stop it growing the way it should. This form of life is tended by the vine-grower who is wise and to whom it belongs. Life in the vine.

And yes, the metaphor can be pushed until it breaks down - with branches thrown in the fire and individual branches fearing the leaf fire at the bottom of the garden. But no, we leave that at the bottom of the garden, and abide in the vine. Abide where life is nurtured, where beautiful form emerges, where God is glorified as the earth is greened by the beautiful life of those who care in Christ. Baptised into the vine. Ethiopians coming to vine. Bearing fruit in the vine. Peace in the vine. There is no reason not to be welcome in the vine. What is to stop us from being baptised? We have faith; we have water; the vine is growing. In this way of life, nothing more is needed. Just abide in the life of the vine.

My colleague moves me to think about what way of life is worth defending. Is the living vine a form of life to the defence of which the shepherd comes?

The vine lives; nothing more is required. And we keep a moment of quiet.

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