

## Sermon Archive 480

Sunday 31 March, 2024

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reading: Romans 6: 3-11

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



I remember the couple telling me that they really didn't want to use traditional vows at their wedding. They loved each other so much that they wanted to speak from the heart, saying something that never before had been said. They didn't want to "parrot" anything; they wanted a bespoke perfect syntactical fitting of word and person.

Commending them on their sincerity and particularity, wondering how to balance a supportive ministerial presence with a feeling that I shouldn't get in their way by being too present, we began the quest for the perfect words. The first attempt was all right, but it didn't quite capture trust. The second was OK, but didn't quite capture freedom. The third failed on unconditionality. The fourth, fifth and sixth failed for various other reasons. In the end, they came to see the time-tested beauty lurking inside the traditional vows, and that's what they went for.

It was a worthy exercise, because words are important. Perhaps the big lesson, though, was that words are not the same as the love they seek to express. And love is not between words - love is between people. The glory of the wedding vow is not in the sentence structure. It is in the fact that "you are you", and I can't quite express the joy that brings me. I am "for you"; I live for you.

-ooOoo-

If I live for you, what does that mean? I profess to being no expert; but I would **say** that if I am living for you, then I do what I do always with you in mind. If I am telling a story, I'll wonder what you would

have made of it. If I'm sharing food, I'll wish that you were at the table. If I'm having a bad day, I'll wish that you could hug me. If I'm having a success, I'll want to tell you all about it. If I'm angry, I'll want you to be safe, and if I'm dying, then I'd want you to be at the foot of my cross, but only if you've got someone by you to comfort you - because I never want you to feel that you're alone. I will want our love to have been such that never again will you feel alone.

-ooOoo-

When an angel whispered in the ear of Joseph, a carpenter from Nazareth, he was told that the child to be born to his wife was Emmanuel, which meant "God with us". At the end of that same life, Jesus took a cup of wine, said it was the new covenant in his blood, gave it to those with whom he had shared his life, and told them "this is for you". That life, at its very beginning and right at its end was presented to them as something lived "for them". This is my body, which is given for you. This is my blood, which is given for you. Do not forget - this is for you.

-ooOoo-

Because our culture leans heavily on the concept of **contract**, we spend lots of time looking for the perfect words to describe our commitments, responsibilities in contracted relationship. We can spend a whole lot of money on lawyers as we deal to words about our required duties (setting them in concrete or wielding them like weapons when things go awry). Because we're contract based, we're always going to struggle with the idea of covenant (whether the covenant be in the word or in the blood). Covenant, like love, is not between words, but between people. The life of Jesus, if a new and living covenant, is not a lot of words; it is God so loving the world that the world may never again be alone. It is not just word. It is deed. It is thought. It is second mile, third mile, (give your shirt also, it has been said).

Rainbows may dissipate. Clouds may hide the stars. Clauses may be voided. The life of Christ, says Paul, has been lived for you. Take it; receive it; be nourished by it; it's actually given for you.

-ooOoo-

Paul writes to the Christians in Rome. And yes, he uses many words. He uses the words to encourage these people who have heard of Jesus, and who have been moved to follow him, to think of his life as having been lived for them. Not because they asked for it to be. Not because it somehow was necessary. But simply because God so loved the world. As my life unfolds, I'm thinking of you. Who'd have thought it? I think of you.

Do I cease to think of you, when the shadows come? Do I cease to think of you when the silver changes hands? Do I cease to think of you when the wrong verdict comes in and the sinful sentence is pronounced? Paul urges the Romans to know that if the life of Jesus was lived in covenant love for the world, then his death **also** was part of his living for the world. And if the death, then also the resurrection. In the love of God, in the covenanting care of God (covenant is not words, it is living for the other), then why should we think that love disengages in the middle of the story?

*"Do you not know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? . . . [And] if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. . . . if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him."* [Romans 6: 3, 5, 8]

Not just the first part, nor just the first and middle parts, but the whole of Christ's engagement with the world is equally for us who

are in Christ. Does he live? Is his life eternal? He is risen; he is risen indeed.

-ooOoo-

Throughout Lent, we thought about covenant. And some of our thinking was about how fragile our expressions of love and commitment seem to be. We allowed ourselves to be amazed at how the love of God staggered on to find new expression in different stages of the experience of the people of God - like God's love had a dogged persistence we both admired, but feared for. How long, O God, we asked, could this realistically last?

Easter says it lasts. Crucifixion may have said "it's dead". But resurrection cries "it lives". Paul now says "not only does it live; but it lives forever. It is an eternal covenant. "We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again [says Paul]; death no longer has dominion over him".

As Easter people, we rejoice in careful words that describe the power of love. We continue to wonder at the persistence of love whose outward appearance is fragile, but whose heart is strong. We rejoice that God's "so loving the world" is pledged again every time we do this in remembrance of him who died. And we dare, in faith, to believe that this is eternal.

Happy Easter to you all. The Lord is risen. He is risen indeed. And before this joyous mystery, we keep a moment of quiet.

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