

## Sermon Archive 481

Sunday 21 April, 2024

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Readings: 1 John 3: 16-24

John 10: 11-18

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



John's gospel. The first letter of John. A story of my grandfather, John. O, and a good shepherd called Jesus.

-ooOoo-

It's an occasion where I've deigned to leave lovely Ōtautahi, and slum it for a while with the poor people of Auckland (otherwise known as my extended family). Aunts, uncles, cousins, sister, mother. I am sitting after lunch at the table, probably talking rubbish and not noticing that the Bovaird girls already are working in the kitchen, tidying up the mess made by everyone else. (They were well brought up, the Bovaird girls were - they silently and unfailingly beat the rest of us to the dishes every time. Their mother would have been proud.).

Probably I've got my elbows on the table (because I wasn't so well brought up), and I notice that my Aunty, the younger of my mother's two sisters, eye is on my left hand. Taking my hand, and looking at the signet ring I wear, she says to me "it's wonderful that you wear that".

I take the ring off my finger and give it to her. She holds it in her fingers, turns it to different angles - she looks at the initials carved into it. JRB, John Roulston Bovaird, her father. She remembers the ring. She simply repeats her judgment that it's wonderful that I wear it. She loved her father very much, and in this small exchange of words and an object, it shows.

In our part of the family, the Jack part, we also are fond of John. He was a charming man from Northern Ireland. He told stories and was quick to buy his friends a beer. He had a good brain, which got him into medical school quite easily - not that he ever qualified, details to come. On a family holiday to some little farm house in a field, he told his children (my mother relates this story) that they shouldn't be scared of the bull on the other side of the field. "If it approaches us", he said "I'll swing on the ring in its nose". In our part of

the family, we love to tell these stories. Also told is the quieter story about moving down from Auckland to take over a radiography business in Nelson. When he arrived in Nelson, he discovered he hadn't bought an Xray outfit. He'd bought an abortion clinic. He tried to make the business work by taking x-rays and not doing abortions. He lost pretty much all his money. There are letters in a cardboard box in Howick that he wrote to my grandmother's parents, begging for money. At this stage they were about to lose all their money in the Great Depression, so they couldn't help. With the business failed, they returned to Auckland, where he got a job in the Xray Department of Auckland Public Hospital. We don't tell the business failure story often, because it's kind of sad. But when it does get told, it's told to say something about the principles of this man John. He could have made Nelson work if he'd been willing just quietly to get on with the work he'd inherited. But he wouldn't. He swallowed his pride, and went home with nothing.

John didn't finish Medical School because already back then he was drinking too much. Drink got in the way of many things that he could have done. Shortly before he died of an alcohol related illness, he wrote a love letter to my grandmother - thanking her for their life together, for the family they had made together, and apologising for being such a failure. She just loved him.

Also just loving him is my aunt - who noticed his ring on my finger. In her part of our family, the stories of drink and failure never get told. I think the truth is known, but the stories never get told. If you say anything remotely critical of John, look out for my aunt - she's coming to get you! She will defend him. It's like she'd swing on the ring of the nose of the bull. You leave my father alone! Even if the world may snigger behind our backs, you leave my father alone.

We, of course, in our part of the family, have a much more nuanced, sensible approach. We'll let certain things be said, because (you know) they're true, and does it really matter now? He's been gone since 1969. We certainly don't mean any disrespect . . .

Jesus observed that there were two kinds of shepherd. One who doesn't really care all that much, so is quick to get out of there whenever a threat presents itself. Enter the wolf - exit the shepherd. (The hired hand, [says Jesus] who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away — and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.)

But then there's the other kind of shepherd who will stand, and if necessary fight - and when I say "fight" I feel uneasy about that expression - but you know what Jesus means: he means that this shepherd will stand between the wolf and the sheep to the shepherd's own cost. Jesus calls it the "laying down of life". That's what I should have said instead of saying "stay and fight".

The critical difference between the two kinds of shepherd, Jesus says, is about "ownership" of the sheep, and caring. You don't own, you don't care. You **do** own, and you put yourself on the line. The brave one is the one who is moved by a sense of "owning" what is threatened.

Maybe we need to be careful with this idea of ownership. Because, as we know, owning a rental property, for instance, doesn't mean keeping it beautiful for the tenants who live in it (don't care). Owning a business doesn't always mean paying those who work for you a decent wage (don't care). And also there's the sad story of Janak Patel defending the Rose Cottage Superette in Sandringham, Auckland, chasing a knife-wielding, cash-register carrying robber down the road, only to be stabbed in the neck. Janak didn't own the dairy. He was only into his third day of taking care of it while its owners were overseas on holiday. He did not own what was being attacked, but he came to its defence. Maybe he was defending not the dairy itself, but the trust of his friends who left him in charge. Was he shepherd-defending the relationship he had with them? Maybe . . . We'll never know, because he laid down his life, so speaks no more. What does **Jesus** mean when he says the critical difference in whether we are good shepherds or not, is to do with owning the sheep?

Well, he talks about the sheep recognising the shepherds voice. There's something there about familiarity. "I know my own, and my own know me". There's also something about "one shepherd and one flock" - like a recognition that "if I don't do it, who's going to?" Somehow, we know that this responsibility is **ours** to honour. There's also something here about love - Jesus says that **into** all of this, or **onto** all of this, God pours something like a parent's love - "yes, for you, whom I love, I'll swing on the ring of its nose." You are not to me something like an asset (which I own like a chattel). You are not to me something the value of which needs to be entered into a calculation of risk and benefit. Are you **worth** losing? To me, you simply are you - forming that space between us into which Jesus says the "Father" pours arohanui, - great love.

A wee bit later in the formation of the story of Jesus, and who he became for those drawn into expressing his risen life, we have the writings of someone else called John. I don't know whether this John was quick to buy a drink, or to write an apology to his wife; but he reckoned that the life of Christ (for us, as to be lived by us) was all about the kind of love seen in the sacrificing spirit and action of the shepherd.

*We know love by this [he writes], that he laid down his life for us - and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.*

In truth and action . . . Does love in truth and action mean forgiving the fact that he's drunk again? Does love in truth and action mean being courageous when the wolf or the bull appears? Does love in truth and action mean picking up our hockey stick and chasing the knife down the street? Does love in truth and action mean dying then rising? He's risen; he's risen indeed?

I wonder when you last saw someone under threat. (Who hasn't watched the news lately?) And I wonder whether you've ever had the sense that somehow you were being called to be the goodness of the shepherd. Or maybe you have seen the wolf coming at **you**, and have marvelled that someone else (whose voice you knew, or were only just beginning to recognise) came to keep you safe from scattering. Or maybe you've seen your aunt being zealous in her defence of her father.

"The hired hand doesn't care", he says; "but I am the good shepherd. I lay my life down for the sheep". Where do we see him? How do we be him?

We keep a moment of quiet.

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