

Sermon Archive 484

Sunday 12 May, 2024

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Readings: Acts 1: 1-11

Luke 24: 44-53

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Rome had been willing to sentence Jesus to death because it saw in him a threat to public order on the day (the stirred-up public calling for his execution), and a wider threat posed in the realm of the hearts and minds of the people. Jesus' teachings about authority, ultimate loyalty, whose we are, all could be narrow ends of many wedges. His ideas were subversive to established power structures (well, so the Jewish authorities claimed).

Not in three of the four gospels, but just in the one of Matthew, it's written that pretty much as soon as the crucifixion had taken place, the chief priests lobbied Pontius Pilate to put a guard on the tomb. "Sir (they said), we remember how the impostor said, while he was still alive 'After three days I will rise again.' Therefore order the sepulchre to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away, and tell the people 'He has risen from the dead', and the last fraud will be worse than the first."

We are told that Pilate was persuaded by this fear, and set a group of soldiers to guard the tomb. The last thing he wanted was for Jesus to continue having power over the people - a power in competition with *his* power over the people. His sole concern, really, was the continuation of the power of Rome.

As a significant military and political power, Rome lasted just under another five hundred years. It had become bloated, unwieldy and decadent - most of the money, culture and fashion had moved East. When it finally fell, no one was very surprised. And for much of those last five centuries, it had to cope with the fact that the escapee from the Jerusalem tomb had continued to play with the imagination of the people. The "last fraud" (quote / unquote) had indeed become "worse than the first".

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While, still some centuries from falling, Rome carried on being in charge, on the other side of the power differential the Christians were having a strange forty days. By what Luke, the writer of the Acts of the Apostles, calls "many convincing proofs" and "appearances", the little community kept feeling that Jesus was continuing to be present among them. Such was their experience, that they wanted to say "he is alive, still God-with-us. He's continuing to talk to us about the Kingdom of God - in ways that give us ideas." This was exactly the kind of thing the chief priests and the Romans feared might happen. They're having to manage not only someone who talks about belonging to another kingdom, but also who appears, then disappears, who is seen, then not seen, who can't be tracked down in the garden and identified by a kiss on the cheek. How do you deal with someone who's out there in the world and can't be locked away. I can imagine them feeling "very concerned" by the forty-day persistence of it all. Noah's family might have spent forty days on the ark; Moses might have spent forty days on the mountain. Jesus might have spent forty days in the desert. But these forty days would have seemed interminably long for those trying to shut down a rumour. Imagine their relief, then, when suddenly the convincing proofs and many appearances seemed to come to an end - Day 41. And their joy when word was it that the Christians had seen him leave - gone back up into the heaven from which he'd come. Thank God, he'd finally gone. Not a lot of damage to be done now - especially since the Christians, these "men of Galilee" are seen now gormlessly standing there and staring up into heaven - as if they don't know what to do next. They're looking sufficiently absurd to bolster the Roman cause.

Unfortunately for the Romans, though, before he went away into heaven, he left instructions for his followers. "Stay here", he'd said, "and wait for a third great wave of Godly power. It'll be with you in just a few days from now."

The forty days are over, but again, the Christians have been set up as a waiting people, an expecting people, a people alive to the coming of a power that is not from Rome, but rather from God. Could this third fraud be worse than the second one!? Well, as we know, it was sufficient for Rome in the next wee while to perform some extraordinarily vicious persecutions of the Christians - arresting, burning, feeding to lions. It would suggest that the third fraud was annoying the Empire very much indeed.

Initially, though, although it annoyed the Romans, I'm not sure that the promise of the Spirit did a whole lot to give the Christians confidence. In response to his announcement of the coming of the Spirit, the Christians ask him whether this is when he will restore the kingdom to Israel. As I read that question, I'm hearing the voice of a community that can see the work isn't quite complete - maybe concerned that it's not. He's about to leave them, go back up to heaven, and the kingdom's still not been restored. Israel's still occupied; the Romans still rule; wasn't the Messiah going to do something about this kind of thing? Surely now has to be the time for us to win!

Responding to their concern, he says only that it's not for them to know anything about any of that. "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set" he says. Then he blesses them, and goes.

So at the Ascension, we have two communities, both in their own way concerned about power, feeling not sure how to feel about Day 41. We have Rome relieved that finally he's gone, but nervous that he talks about a third wave of power just around the corner. And we have the Christians, waiting, wondering, uselessly staring up into the sky, and being painfully aware that the work hasn't yet been done. Rome still seems to be winning (as powerful governments often seem to be). They don't know yet that the fall already has begun.

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Let's rush fast forward through the next wee part of history. The Empire falls. There's a thousand years of ages we call "dark". Then there's something of re-birth, the flourishing of art and science, the transiting of the oceans and the discovery of space. One small step for "a man" lands someone on the moon, and Voyager 1, now 1.5 billion miles from earth, continues to send us messages. And here, on a planet well beneath the heaven into which Jesus disappeared, the church continues its waiting, its watching, its living in the presence of the risen one, its hoping for the "kingdom to be restored to us".

Rome, of course, over the years has been re-manifest by Adolf Hitler, by Josef Stalin, by Pol Pot, Vladimir Putin and Benjamin Netanyahu. There's never any shortage of substitutes for Rome. And they, each in their own time have given the impression that they are in charge, that they're winning. But I wonder what a people of the Ascended Christ might bring to them . . . to make them as vulnerable to Faith as Rome was to the presence of Jesus.

Some years ago, I heard a friend and colleague using the expression "the menace of hope". It's a funny combination of scary and beautiful. That hope could be a menace captured my imagination. Do you think that a people of hope could menace a people of violence? Do you think there could be power in the belief that Christ could be anywhere, was now beyond being killed, but still capable of speaking to his people, giving them a power to speak and heal and live? Do you think there might be seeds of disobedience to be found in his claim "see what love can do"? Do you think that a watching, waiting, praying, believing people, who know that a great Pentecost is coming, might prize the power out of the hands of Rome - or its successors? And do you think that our being disguised as the gormless of Galilee, staring up into heaven, is just a clever kind of Trojan Horse?

The seeds of a new power, a falling old Empire, a menace to the world in the form of a people with hope . . . Is that the kind of thing that might restore the kingdom that for just the current time has been stolen?

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The forty day season of Easter began with a breathless claim that he is risen. And week by week we've watched the news spread - to disciples, to doubting Thomases, to travellers on the Emmaus Road. To sheep of the shepherd, to Ethiopian eunuchs, to every branch in the vine. The vine grows; it is tended; fruit is harvested. The life expands - and maybe seizes back the kingdom. Lord is now when you will restore the kingdom? While Rome may object, now the living One is lifted up high above, for all the world to see, to hear, to hold. We are witnesses to these things. "Not many days from now", he says, "the Spirit will come" - the welcome menace of hope.

So, while Rome falls and hope beckons, we keep a moment of quiet.

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