

Sermon Archive 485

Sunday 19 May, 2024

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Two Reflections for Pentecost

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Lesson: John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15

Reflection: Gently speaking the truth

My father hugs me at the airport, and tells me that he just wants me to be happy. We've not until then been a huggy father and son, but things have sort of changed now. It means a lot to me that he tells me he wants me to be happy. It's kind of his way of saying that he's heard what I've said, and is wrapping his arms around it. Not sure that he's embracing it, but he's embracing me, and that's probably more important.

About a week before then, I had come out to him. We'd been on the deck out the back of the house talking in a slightly stilted way about nothing in particular. One of those conversations going nowhere, only happening because you're trying to find a perfect segue into what you know you *need* to say. So I told him. I felt I had to, because by then I'd met someone, and while you can keep your celibate self in a closet, it's harder to keep an expanding relationship secret. I didn't want him to hear from others, so I told him.

He listened, said not much, looked at his son. Then there was a wee lull, when he sort of just looked out over the back garden. He observed that it was a nice sunny day, and that was that really.

I remember feeling relief that now he knew what Mum had known for a couple of days. I remember thinking that it had gone kind of well. I remember thinking that he was probably OK. So that's why it was good to hear a week later that all he wanted was for me to be happy. That kind of reassured me that OK he was!

After he died, I was talking to my sister about the coming out. I told her that we had been lucky to have had father who wasn't rattled by such things. It was then that she told me that after I had spoken to him on the

deck, and he'd observed that it was a lovely sunny day, he'd gone inside and cried. Jesus said "Because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts. Nevertheless, I tell you the truth".

I'm reading John's description of the conversation that Jesus is having with his disciples. Soon they're going to feel like he has left them behind, that he's gone, that he's no longer the familiar One they knew. "Who was he?" they'll ask, "he who had been with us from the beginning?" Why did he say that thing, then become someone else, and fill us with sorrow?

They'll ask those sorts of things. And he'll talk about the importance of expressing the truth - even when the truth makes us cry. He'll talk a lot about the Spirit of Truth guiding us into the Truth, sharing with us all that is his. (He will take what is mine and declare it to you. There will be glory in it. There will be light. Sorrow will be in your heart - he says - but there will be light in there too.)

As I read John's description of the thoughts of Jesus, his thinking about the Advocate who will come once he has gone, and as I find myself thinking about Pentecost as a time of the telling of Truth, I find myself thinking about the complicated dynamics of truth-telling, and the cluster of emotions that can spin around "the space between us" when light is shone.

So I write this prayer:

Gracious Spirit of Truth, Advocate of Jesus, our Defender; when we know that we have truth to tell, and feel it stirring within us, is that you? As we are helped along the road to understanding who we are, and to what we are called, is that you? When we find ourselves fashioning the right words into the right sentences for the right reasons, is that you? And when we are deeply concerned not to hurt those we love, but know that we might have necessary sorrow to place in their hearts, is it you? Speak to us, loving Spirit of Truth, that through what we say, and how we say it, the light and life of Christ might shine. When we have hard things to say, enable us to be not just truthful, but kind. Give us the right Spiritual gifts to deal with the tears of those to whom we speak; and may this Pentecost find us being gentler witnesses to you. For we pray this in Jesus' name.

Lesson: Acts 2:1-21

Reflection: In my "own language"

I'm not from around here. I won't bore you with the story of how I ended up so far from where I was born. It won't interest you, and I'm not sure that I could tell the story well anyway. It's that language thing again. You just speak it. Without even thinking, you speak it. All the words come naturally; they easily find the perfect fit for what you want to say. For me, the effort starts with my first waking moment. There I've been, in the world of my dreams, everything easy; and then when I wake, it's "O yes, that's right, I'm going to have to do this in English. I go to the bathroom and say to myself "bathroom". I shave my face and say "shave my face". I have my shower and say "the shower has hot; no! The shower IS hot. No, the water in the shower is hot - no, not hot, what is it when it's not cold, but isn't hot?" Before breakfast, I look the word up - it's warm. Of course it's warm.

One of the things I find in this language is that it makes me more serious than I'd like to be. At home I enjoyed word play. A lot of humour is word play. Jokes thrive on double meanings, and clever phrasing. So at home I was funny, you know, witty. People liked that, and so did I. You can tell he's quick, got a good brain. Here I never say anything entertaining - though sometimes I provide a laugh by saying something wrong. But then they're laughing at me, rather than with me. And O God yes, prepositions - at me, with me, by me, under me, over me, in front of me, behind me - or is that behind I? Pronouns as well! Often I say "how do you say". That's just me talking to myself I suppose. If you hear me saying that, you're hearing me coping with the world.

Now and then I'll find someone else who knows my language, and it's such a relief to be able to speak without thinking. But then people look at me sideways - observe that I'm not assimilating properly. Bloody ghetto, they say. Why doesn't he speak our language.

Some days it's really tiring. I'll go home, turn on the TV, and it's all in English. I listen to the radio, and it's all in English. I mean I know we speak English here, I know it. I bought into it. It's fine. It's just that it's really tiring. Life, for me, has become an exercise of translation. Nothing is direct - everything has this extra layer of complication. I cannot say

how I am. Nothing makes perfect and easy sense. I wonder if you know how this feels . . . Maybe you have to be far from home to know.

In the market place, busy noisy and bustling, I heard my language cutting through. It was like all the rest was only white noise, and my language came through. It spoke to me of a God of love, and of a man who'd lived bravely. It spoke of how he loved, and cried and died, and rose - saying "peace be with you" - peace be with you, he said. It was so clear, so uncomplicated, so true to me. And I wonder if you know how *that* feels - feels like God, Godself is speaking.

When God speaks, there is no need for translation. When God speaks, there is no need to work. When God speaks, it's like God knows who I am, and cares, and speaks for me. It's no so much lips to ears; it's heart to heart - God's own heart.

And so I write this prayer.

Gracious Spirit of Truth, Advocate of Jesus, our Defender; when it is beautiful in its simplicity, and we know without complication that we are addressed, is that you? When amid the unfriendliness of what we cannot say, and the frustration of saying something that is close enough to what we really want to say, and the perfect Word comes to our ears, is that you? When the sideways stares say "failure to assimilate", but the Word says "welcome home", is that you? Is it you when we understand the story of love, and dying and rising, and know that it is ours? Is it you in the feeling that our hearts perfectly have been understood? Is it you in the great wind and fire of Pentecost - the hubbub of including understanding? In the knowing that I am known, is it you? It *is*. It is you.

O breath of life, come sweeping through us,
revive your church with life and power;

O breath of life, come cleanse, renew us,
and fit your church to meet this hour.

Amen.

The Knox Church website is at: <http://www.knoxchurch.co.nz.html> . Sermons are to be found under News / Sermons.