

## Sermon Archive 526

Sunday 9 March, 2025

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Readings: Exodus 3: 1-10

Matthew 20: 20-28

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Workforce. Interesting expression that: **workforce**. "Work" sounds kind of mechanical, industrial. "Force" sounds strong, empowered. In reality, of course the workforce is made up of people - who have children, insecurities, needs and quirks. Some get sick; some get discouraged and fall over. But when it comes to achieving results in the economy, either well or badly recompensed, they're the "workforce".

I have three television news stories about the workforce.

**Story Number One.** A while back, Katie Bradford was thinking about how we're struggling in this country to build infrastructure. From the burst water pipes of Poneke, to the pot holed roads of Northland; from crashing ferries on the Cook Strait to the decaying hospitals in every corner of the country, we've obviously got a problem. Katie decided to pick the brain of Sean Sweeney who'd come back home to Aotearoa New Zealand in 2016 to manage the Auckland City Rail Link project - a series of train tunnels under Tamaki Makaurau.

Sean noted that one infrastructure development problem comes in the form of the three year electoral cycle. It's not uncommon for a project green-lit by one government to be cancelled by the next (especially if it's expensive). Commercial operators don't like the risk of committing to projects which may never get off the ground. And when they're managing commercial risk, they tend to charge more to cover the risk - making projects impossibly expensive.

Sean talked also of the challenge of creating a skilled workforce. **Project** - build a tunnel. **Challenge** - find people with tunnel building skills. **Setback** - none are present in New Zealand, since we haven't been building tunnels. Any tunnel builders we did have, left, because they needed work that we couldn't offer. Now we **can** offer some work, they just aren't here. Recruiting people from overseas takes time (which is money). You need to find somewhere for the workers to live (which is difficult during a housing crisis).

You need also to organise somewhere for the workers' children to attend school. It's all time consuming and expensive! Once the project is complete, the workers leave the country, because this project was a one-off and there's nothing more for them to do. If, five years later, you want to build another tunnel, you have to start again from scratch. Sean characterises this as the curse of a "one off" approach.

Katie is interviewing Sean in August of 2024, just before he departed for a new project in Dublin. He noted that all his specialist tunnelling staff already had left the country. "They had to", he said. "They needed the work". Some, who had fallen in love with the country, so didn't want to leave, had moved sideways into road construction - but most had gone. It's economics, it's workforce; it's politics, it's risk and money. And in this instance, Sean's not sure our workforce model is right.

**The second workforce story** comes from early November last year, and involved 30 RSE workers. RSE stands for "Recognised Seasonal Employer". It's a scheme whereby, if for instance you have a whole lot of apples needing picking from your trees in Hawkes Bay, you can import willing workers from overseas to do the picking, and then to return home. I say "willing workers", to contrast them with local people who might do the picking, but just don't want to. Picking is hard physical work, and not everyone's able to do it. RSE workers of course need somewhere to stay, so employers need to provide temporary accommodation. Some work with local motels. Some have accommodation blocks on site. The blocks aren't anything to write home about. Nor indeed are the relatively low wages that are paid (minimum wage plus 10%). The oft-quoted reason for the system not falling over, is that the wages, while low in Kiwi terms, are still better than the workers would get at home, in Tonga, Samoa or the Solomons. Some economic balancing act makes it work for the workers and the growers - except when there are closed borders, receiverships or bus accidents. Indeed the television news story last November featured 30 Tongan RSE workers involved in a bus accident outside of Rotorua. Eleven of them suffered significant injuries, and we blamed them for not wearing seatbelts. The apples need picking - but are we getting this right?

**The third workforce story** was about a group of construction workers who'd paid an immigration adviser back in the Philippines to find them jobs in Tāmaki Makaurau. Unfortunately, none of the jobs really existed, so neither did the income from which they were going to re-coup the costs of getting here. Laden with debt and no capacity to go home again, they were stuck in borrowed accommodation, living off the charity of locals who cared. You might say that this was not an example of anyone in New Zealand not getting

it right. Maybe the charity of Kiwis who organised accommodation and food for the workers shows that WE got something right - the wrong being firmly located back in the Philippines. Maybe. In a world where work needs doing, some people become oppressed in the process. Are we getting it right?

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Entering a time of what you might call infrastructural expansion, Egypt needed workers. Cities needed building - and maybe one or two pyramids. Maybe the Egyptian workforce was fully deployed already - or maybe this was work that Egyptians didn't want to do (like picking fruit). Maybe a clue can be found in the quiet wee verse that says the Pharaoh was concerned about this particular ethnic group present among his population. He worried about them becoming successful. So indeed, maybe under the **excuse** of infrastructure needs, he declared an underclass of workers - people who had no choice other than to work in roles that would break their spirit - forced labour. We call it "slavery". It is said that the Hebrew slaves cried out to their God, to be saved.

Meanwhile, far away from the building projects (where we weren't getting it right), Moses is taking care of his father-in-law's flock of sheep. He believes that his god is calling him to "call old Pharaoh to let my people go". One man of faith is finding a conviction forming within him, that God is on the side of the people who need to be set free. There may be good workforce reason behind their enslavement. And Pharaoh may have absolute power to create a slave class. And Moses might have some distance between himself and those who are suffering. But there is fire in that there bush; it's flaming for the freedom of the people - and calling Moses to get down to Egypt. He needs, **we** need to get this right. Where there is slavery, the God of Moses calls us to work for freedom.

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Thirteen hundred years later, Jesus is approached by the mother of two of his disciples. She has ambitions for her sons - for them to be raised above all the other disciples to a special place of honour. She's not asking for the others to be oppressed - not asking for them to be counted as an underclass. But she's certainly asking for the establishment of a hierarchy - with her sons rising to the top.

Jesus is reasonably gentle with her. He asks her a few questions, puts before her a couple of challenges. The other disciples give her a harder time - we're told that they became "angry". In response to their anger, Jesus makes it clear that greatness comes not through where you are

seated, not how near the top you are - but through a servant heart - nurturing a spirit of humble service. He then speaks of himself not only as serving, but also by giving his life as a **ransom** for many.

In his days, "ransom" was a word used to describe a payment made to release someone from slavery. It was a wage paid to an "owner" to release the "owned". Jesus is describing his life, his ministry, as a setting free of the enslaved. Neither the disciples' mother, nor any of the disciples were talking about slavery. This "ransom" idea appears to have come out of nowhere - unless you reckon that maybe Jesus means to say that the dynamics of slavery creep into even the ordinary relationships we have with those around us. Creeping in around the ways in which we deny the freedoms of others. Creeping in around the ways in which we prevent the flourishing of others, because somehow we feel that prevention will advance our freedom or advantage. Jesus uses the words of ransom to unpick what's going on when one disciple wants to rise above another.

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When fruit pickers are paid badly, because it's better than the nothing they'd get at home, are our relationships free of a creeping spirit of slavery? When Philipinos are sent to do jobs that don't exist, and end up begging for charity, are our relationships free from creeping slavery? When infrastructure stumbles, and the public suffers because we won't free money to provide work stability for workers who need to work, are our relationships free from creeping slavery? When I see you not as a free person, but simply as "workforce to be bought", is our relationship free from creeping slavery?

Moses sees that there is heat in that fire. Jesus sees that his life is a setting free of others. We are called to think of how we can function among others as a matter of paying a ransom.

Lent begins. Does Easter present us with a vision? We keep a moment of quiet.