

Sermon Archive 528

Sunday 23 March, 2025

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reading: John 8: 31-44

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



So far, as we've explored the theme of slavery, it's been anchored in the story of the Hebrew people suffering in Egypt around the time of Moses (mid 13th Century BCE). We'd pondered various theories about why Egypt might have found slavery economically beneficial - easy access to a cheap workforce to do work that locals weren't interested in doing. We pondered that strange realm of hardness of heart - where it became clear that the enslavement of others isn't actually always about rational economic thought - but about resentments, fears and suspicions that lie maybe just beneath the surface.

Today I want to scratch the surface - go looking for the errors of thought that inform the resentments, fears and suspicions. I'm looking for errors of thought (beliefs that are false). And why I'm looking for them should be become evident when we hear the angry words of someone living in an occupied land whose should-be protectors are making things worse. The angry young Jew will call the people who are making things worse "children of the father of all lies". We look to uncover the enslaving lies that are told, believed and given reign to rule!

-ooOoo-

The matter of Andaman. A sensitive and kind person, Andaman grew up in the rural Northern part of Thailand, raised in the main by his grandmother who taught him how to cook wonderful things in the kitchen. He managed to get a student visa to Australia, and moved there with a wee bag of nicely pressed clothes, a super cheap computer, and a hope to make his grandmother proud. Life in Australia turned out tougher than imagined. The primitively cobbled budget didn't work, and things became a wee bit pressed. Andaman was a good looking man, and the brothel owners provided what looked like a short term solution. Under the terms of his visa, he wasn't allowed to work, but the brothel took care of all that - hiding his income, providing he surrendered to them his passport. Lodging the passport was a normal security measure, they said, for the risk they were taking on his behalf.

So Andaman now was stuck. At this point the drug dealer arrived, (brother in law to the brothel owner) implicating him in crimes for which he could be convicted, and also giving him a habit that was expensive to maintain. Now he needs to work to service the debt - and indeed earns no money at all for himself. Working for no money - is that something akin to slavery? Some people call it human trafficking - some "sex slavery". If he complains to authorities, it'll become clear that he's breached the conditions of his visa - deportation. If the other crimes stick, it'll be deportation after a time of imprisonment. After a while, deportation to Thailand might begin to look like something good - were it not for his grandmother at home still believing that her boy is doing well.

A voice speaks. Andaman, it says, made some bad choices; and bad choosing often brings suffering. The moment Andaman agreed to sell his body, he ceased to be a victim, becoming instead the architect of his own poor outcome. He has **chosen** slavery.

A voice speaks. Andaman is an immigrant to Australia - he's actually lucky to be there; he certainly shouldn't rock the boat by complaining about his situation. Guests should not criticise the house. You have to contribute to a society before you have the right to expect it to change - you have to earn your right to complain.

A voice speaks. Andaman is a brown man. He's poor. His English isn't very good. By taking up a spot in a class he never actually attends anymore, he's taking an educational opportunity away from a white Australian who **would** go to class. He'd be better off crouching on the floor of his grandmother's kitchen, eating beetles and banana leaves.

This voice speaks, and modern-day slavery flourishes.

-ooOoo-

The matter of a civil war waged within the United States. When it was written and adopted in 1787, no reference to slavery was included in the Constitution of the United States. It wasn't prohibited; some analysts of the text conclude that implicitly it is allowed. Whatever the case, under the Constitution slavery flourished. In the early days, most of the states forming the United States had some form of slavery. It was most pronounced in the states down South where huge tracts of cotton fields needed picking and other plantations were labour-hungry. Most slaves were shipped across the Atlantic from West Africa, around current day Togo, Benin and Nigeria.

Many were deposited in what became known as "Seasoning Camps" - mainly in the Caribbean. Slaves spent up to a year in the camps, where gradually their old language, customs and cultural identity were obliterated. The idea was to move them into a more compliant mode before being released onto the market. No one wanted a stropky slave. It is estimated that 12.8 million slaves "entered" the United States in this way.

Around the time of the American Revolution, many Northern States abolished slavery. In a way, it was easier for those states, since slavery was not the huge social phenomenon up there the way it was in the South. Pressure went onto the Federal government to abolish nationwide. The trouble was that a majority of congressmen in the House of Representatives were slave owners. The people with the legislative power to end slavery had self interest in slavery remaining in place. Anyway, some courageous conversations later, and one civil war, abolition was achieved. On 1 January, 1863, with the stroke of a pen, President Abraham Lincoln changed the status of an estimated 3 million people from "slave" to "free". This did not make him universally popular. Just over a year later, having just argued that some (not all) talented and committed ex-slaves should be given the vote, he suffered a theatre accident.

Some one hundred years later, a Baptist preacher called Martin Luther King made the point that many of his people still had to experience full civil liberty (I have a dream that the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood). He had a balcony accident in Memphis. People speaking for the emancipation of the slave do seem to have accidents.

A voice speaks. Into the ear of a slave owning congressman, it says "you benefit from this; and your private benefit is more your concern than some amorphous social good. And actually this matter shouldn't be on your desk at all - it's a matter for the individual states. It's none of your federal business."

A voice speaks. Lincoln was a negro-lover. King was communist. Both are corrosive of our society. So don't you worry about them, We'll leave them to our friends on the balconies and in the theatres.

A voice speaks. What do they want anyway - now they've got the vote. Yes, if they're not doing well, it's less to do with civil liberties than it is with being lazy or entitled.

-ooOoo-

I consider Andaman, the brown Thai man who needs to learn to shut up about his pain. Given that he's not from around here, he's not really our problem. I also cannot help but notice that slavery in the United States was something done by white people to black people. Fuelling slavery historically, and fuelling its equivalent today, a common element is the presence of good old fashioned racism. And racism is a language spoken by the father of all lies.

Jesus confronts the religious power-brokers of his day. They talk to him about being the children of Abraham - so being above reproach. They belong to an exulted class - a special caste, so they have the power to treat others as they wish.

Jesus tells them that they are **not** the children of Abraham (who had faith and courage), but rather children of the father of all lies. Their belief in their own superiority, and its resultant right to oppress and dismiss those considered inferior, is just a lie. And he is seeing through it.

Just as well, I suppose, that he doesn't have plans to go to the theatre. Just hope he keeps clear of open balconies.

-ooOoo-

For the first two Sundays of Lent, the sermon has included a question about how Easter might present a vision to us, a people surrounded by Lenten shadows. Does Easter shine a light into the Lenten challenge?

We know how Lent will end. The same cohort of people with whom Jesus is disagreeing will convince Rome that he needs to be executed. The power of their lying about him will seem to have had a decisive victory. But then there will be Easter - and we will wonder about the fading power of the lie. As we touch today on the seemingly great power of racism and slavery, in Easter, do we see the Truth rising in triumph? We look to Easter morning.

We keep a moment of quiet.

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