

Sermon Archive 533

Friday 18 April, 2025

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reflection for Good Friday

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Reading: Matthew 26: 14-16

In a more or less sustained way, the good people explored the issue of slavery. They did it from the safety of their church. They attached the beginning of their journey to some stories about an ancient people given over to build cities in Egypt for the people of Egypt - though they themselves were not Egyptian - all for no payment. The good people couldn't help but observe that part of the problem was linked to the people not being from around these parts - racism - which seemed to find echoes in pretty much every example of slavery that formed the rest of the rest of the Lenten journey. Also part of the story was this intransigent economic thing that work needed doing, and the economy was always going to produce people to work for less than was just. For various reasons, the work of the working people, and indeed not just their work, but their very selves was not greatly valued. People became work units. They ceased to be beloved, precious, "worth many sparrows". They became commodities. One hideous poster was circulated - posted on the noticeboards and included in the orders of service: To be sold on Thursday the third day of August next, a cargo of ninety-four prime, healthy negroes - just arrived from Sierra Leon - by David and John Deas. The good people were horrified that people could be turned into stock. They looked to the One who was to come, whose "are you not worth many sparrows" would put an end to that kind of economy. Human beings were not to be bought and sold. Well, today - SOLD! He went for thirty pieces of silver.

In a more or less sustained way, from the safety of their church, the good people explored the issue of right and wrong. They did this because they just felt, in all the economic stuff, that deeper wrongs were feeding the commodification - deeper things moved by the Father of all Lies, and

fostered by the Father's children. Vulnerable students were losing their passports to pimps and drug dealers. RSE workers were being blamed for not wearing seat-belts. Construction workers were required to live in shipping containers. It all just felt **wrong**. And in the face of wrong, this great well of protest tends to rise - not just in the breast of the wronged, but in the sympathies of the good people who notice. It seemed so obviously unjust. To free us from it, we needed someone who might, like, go to court and win! Someone who could reveal the wrong by securing the right - cleanse the temple and call out the corruption - maybe this side of the end, harrow the hell!

Well today he goes to court and loses. Turns out that he's just as much a slave to wrong as we are. Sold for thirty pieces of silver.

In a more or less sustained way, the good people explored the issue of slavery - and the place within it of hope and fear. O, there's so much fear in these transactions. It is by the fostering of fear that the overlords "hold the table". We're frightened not simply for ourselves, but for our husbands, wives and children - our friends. The maintaining of mental equilibrium, emotional calm, the proper perspective that surrenders nothing to the flapping things of fear. For, if you can just keep your head, then you have your head - and head . . . when it comes to being poised in this strange campaign for right and freedom and the smashing of slavery, what a gift is confidence and calm! And maybe that's part of what always assured us in this ministry of the Christ. Standing firm against the one who destroys, always and ever he seemed in control. Yet tonight, in his garden of tears, he weeps, he cries, he gasps and perspiration falls like globs of blood . . . Thirty pieces of silver already have changed hands, and he waits for the soldiers to arrive. Losing composure, praying that the cup will be taken away, such that he mightn't need to drink it, he becomes as much a slave to fear as any of us. Sold for thirty; sold.

In a more or less sustained way, the good people explored the stories told by two people in servitude - who had to battle for some semblance of dignity. Jourdain Anderson, trying to explain to his ex-slave-master what it meant to be shot at, to have his children abused by drunk young men, to have his wife not offered the courtesy of being addressed as "Mrs" Anderson, to be declared as having no educational potential - as

no schooling was provided. And to have to explain why he wouldn't want to return to the status quo of a racist, enslaving put-down. And the story of Onesimus, a run-away slave sent back to his former master with a letter in his hand and a gamble on faith making things different this time. Even should the old master acquiesce to Pauline request, how does he live again as a person of worth in the house of someone who used to own him? O God, we sought the solace of the Christ who believed in us - who treated us as equally important. We sought our dignity in his seriousness. "Be thou my dignity, thou my delight; thou my soul's shelter, thou my high tower: raise thou me heav'nward, O power of my power".

Well, today, thanks to a fee of 30 pieces of silver, he's robed in mocking purple, crowned with thorns, spat upon, and laughed at. He's paraded before a crowd, before he's stripped naked on the cross. Dignity - all for thirty pieces of silver. **Sold** for thirty pieces of silver. Sold!

In a more or less sustained way, the good people explored the agency of this man. He had such an independence of thought, original vision. When he taught the people, he sometimes would say "you have heard it said, **but I say to you**". This was someone front-footing his life. He was such a provocateur - a spirit truly wild and free!

The word is "agency" - the capacity to make momentum, to take charge of the situation - to do, no, in fact truly to be. He left the carpenter's workshop, by his own agency. He built a new community around him, by his own agency. He won the world's attention, by his own agency. He moved with an elusive whirling that still seemed strategic in his few and rare years, by his own agency. He turned his face to Jerusalem, took up his cross and walked, by his own agency. He drives. He is in control. He's no slave to the driving of others . . . Is he?

Well, today, sold for thirty pieces of silver, that all kind of stalls. He seems no longer in control - and that fetching, wonderful, overwhelming sense of drive is dying. Agency becomes a slave to the slowing death of holiness halted. It's a sin to see life draining away . .

Sold for thirty pieces of silver, he's no less a slave to captivity than we are. Sold for thirty pieces of silver.

Hey, let's sing song, then hear a story. And in the story, let's all within us that cares for the slave, just hold a breath.

Epilogue:

How savagely eloquent are you, bloody God? And how basely cruel to the hope you'd encouraged us to foster?

See this man of freedom, you said. You took our hands and then put them in his. "Come walk with me", he said, "while we explore all the ways we might be free". Remember the Exodus from Egypt. Let your hearts be moved by Andaman, and the construction workers, and the African Americans who rose up high (or didn't). Let them, and their stories, and my call to you, bring you with me to the greater freedom.

What kind of messed up mind lets his journey end in a grave? With a great, heavy stone rolled across a door, how could this look more like a prison? No life, no breath. No agency of his own to turn to the rock that blocks the way to light and life that still goes on.

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to set free those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour . . .*

Luke 4: 18-19

Well, let's see you do that from the prison of a tomb!

Throughout Lent, we have wondered whether a vision might shine towards us from Easter. Well, today, if it doesn't . . .

Slavery!