

Sermon Archive 545

Sunday 20 July, 2025

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Human rights: Access to welfare

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Introduction: Metiria's Mistake

One-time Green Party co-leader, Metiria Turei, made a huge political mistake by assuming that the electorate would cope with her honesty about how she got by on welfare in a time of great need. It seems that to keep the benefit coming, she told a few lies, made a few shonky applications - since she had a hungry baby who needed feeding.

Metiria's hope, at her time of disclosure, I think was that her own story would soften the attitude of the public to those who, through no major crime against society, had come upon times of need. She'd hoped that the story of a struggling mother would win the hearts of those who heard. That turned out to be a serious mis-reading of the room.

Had my Uncle Peter been alive at the time of Metiria's confession, he would have called for her resignation. As I grew up, Uncle Peter was the family figure who hated welfare bludgers, who insisted that everyone pay their way, including those who generally were brown, poor or needy. Such people were a drain on **our** society.

Uncle Peter didn't know that the minister who buried him had spent a few months in 1992 on the dole. Trying to come up with a doctoral thesis topic, but not formally enrolled at university, so not entitled to a study grant, and having found my regular holiday job at the Howick Bus Company not available (they had no vacancies), like Metiria, I knocked on the door of Social Welfare. As I look at it now, I shouldn't have. I should have tried to find a part-time job in Dunedin - so I could have carried on in spare time trying to find a topic. I suspect I couldn't find one. Our current unemployment rate (2025), even after significant public service redundancies is 5.1%. In 1992 the unemployment rate was 10.6%. That was a time when jobs were very hard to find.

Interestingly, I can't remember why I went off the dole. I certainly didn't win Lotto or rob a bank. Maybe my conscience kicked in - or maybe the next university holidays provided a vacancy at the Bus Company. Meanwhile, at pretty much

the same time, solo-mother Metiria was looking for support for a child whom she, by herself, was raising.

An early question, hanging in ancient scripture, is the question put to God by Cain, who's just killed his brother, Abel. The question is "am I my brother's keeper?" The implied answer, from God's point of view, is "**yes**, you are; you **are** your brother's keeper".

Maybe especially when he is sick? Especially when he can't find work? Especially when his usual structures of support have gone?

The Universal Declaration mentions: necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

The first of a couple of readings.

The First Lesson: John 19: 25b-27

Reflection: Mary was a widow

Mary, the mother of Jesus, was a widow. We don't know when she became one, since there's no certainty about the date of the death of Joseph. But certainly, if Joseph had still been alive when Jesus left Nazareth, there would have been some mention made of that. While a Protestant reading of her family situation allows for Jesus maybe to have had brothers and sisters, the Catholic position is that Mary had only one child. If that was the case, then it was up to that child to support his widowed mother. It's kind of hard to do that when you're drifting around the countryside, rather than working in the workshop - when you're depending on others to feed you, rather than generating a solid income for yourself. I wonder if his mother's vulnerable situation played on his conscience as he took off to chase the Spirit who blows like the wind in a thousand paddocks. I wonder what kind of calculating he did as he worked out that priority - slightly different calculation, I think, than that going on the mind of J.D. Vance and his friends who say that charity begins and ends at home. Whatever . . .

In his chasing after the Spirit, Jesus did seem to operate out of a concern for people who weren't his technical responsibility. His healing ministry worked along the lines of helping whoever asked for help. He only ever once refused to help someone with a healing, but quickly changed his mind on that - the Canaanite woman, whose daughter he described as a "dog". Maybe that was a learning point for him - bread for all the people.

In his teaching, he told some very poignant parables about people in need. The fallen figure on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho - walked past by priests and Levites - stripped of his clothes and his money. Jesus describes him as being "half dead". The hero of the story is a stranger who provides not just sympathy, but bandages, food, shelter, money for the inn-keeper. Who is my neighbour? The one who showed mercy.

He was said also to have said "which among you, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake? And which, if your child asks for an egg, will deliver a scorpion?" No; in goodness, you give people what they need. Mercy - giving people what they need - was such a huge theme in his teaching.

And here, in the reading we've heard, we find him using what remaining words he has to speak to his mother and to a disciple he's said very much to have loved - John, the beloved disciple.

When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

A last concern for Jesus seemed to be that his mother (the widow) would not be without support. And the beloved disciple seems to have understood (without argument - he responds immediately) that his responsibility was to care for her. She's not his mother, but now, somehow in the love that's formed his Christian consciousness, he has indeed become her son. From that very moment, he takes her into his home.

The legacy of his life with Christ (for John) is to care for the widow. *"Necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control."*

This seems only natural to the beloved disciple of Jesus.

Knox Singers: O how amiable
Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)

The Second Lesson: Acts 2: 43-47

Reflection: Disbursement Criteria

Fed by a "sense of awe" at the things that the Jesus-inspired apostles seemed to be able to achieve in real time, the believers ate their food with glad and

generous hearts. There was a new togetherness - people leaving their separate places, their separate lives, and setting up home here - with you and me, God's house becoming **our** house - the many made one in the one love.

I wonder if the selling of possessions and the sharing of all things in common was an idea of the apostles - or whether it happened spontaneously among the people. I like to think that there was something of the spontaneous about it - fed by goodwill, rather than by regulation and compliance imposed from above. I'm fairly sure though, that there must have been some organisational structure around the distribution of proceeds to all, as each had need. Do you think? I mean needs need to be assessed, don't they? And that needs to be done by people of competence - doesn't it?

I note also that day by day the "Lord added to their number". The cynic might wonder whether the swelling number had anything to do with news spreading that this was a good place to find financial support . . . Do you think the community ever had to deal with suspicions that certain community members were not hearing Jesus, but banging on the door of a cargo cult? Free money and food, gullible organisers - Come on!

Every time welfare is available, the cynics explore such thoughts - as do the people who've been given responsibility to disburse the generosity of others. The dove-like people of gentleness need also to be fox-like in their cunning. One has to be wise! Hence assessment criteria, and endless "to and fro" beyond the Church between the political left and political right about who should receive support, and for how long, and to what level . . .

The Universal Declaration on Human Rights strove to be a faith and culture free statement. We come to the matter of social services and financial support from a different, faith-informed position. We come as those who stand in a tested tradition of sharing what we have. Don't we? Wasn't there something we saw in the life of Christ that moved us to share what we have?

How does the following sit in our Christian ears? Everyone has the right to access *"necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his [or her] control."*

How **does** that sit in our ears, and rest in our hearts? We keep a moment of quiet.

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