

## Sermon Archive 546

Sunday 27 July, 2025

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Human rights: Access to Health

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



### **A First-World story of a broken arm**

I had nothing to compare it with, since I'd never broken a bone before; but as I hit the floor, I knew it wasn't good. It was reasonably late on a Friday night, and I'd moved the low wooden chest from the garage into the hallway, as part of my re-organising the garage. "I'll work out where to put the chest later" I'd thought. Nursing the new hurt, I couldn't say "who put that chest there", because I'd put the chest there.

As I said, It took no time at all to work out that I was going to need medical attention. The question was how do you do that when it's late at night, you live alone and know that your arm is such that you can't drive.

The nice person doing triage at the 111 Emergency phone line decided that an ambulance was either not available or unwarranted. She told me that I should get an Über to the After-hours Medical Centre in Madras Street. I don't do Übers, so rang a taxi, which took what felt like a long time to arrive. As the taxi drove me off down Papanui Road, I didn't realize that it was going to be a ten hour return trip. The Medical Centre was seriously busy.

Several hours into the process, I was being interviewed by a nurse. What had happened. How had I fallen, and all about the angles. Suddenly, out of nowhere, I just burst into tears. She called me "you poor old thing", wrapped me in a blanket, and put me into a lazy-boy chair in a small dark room down the corridor. I remember drifting off to sleep in the chair, aware that outside it was rainy and windy. Funny, the things you remember.

I had several consultations during the night, as various medical people became available, then unavailable again, then available. Everyone I engaged with was helpful. None of them could "magic" the broken bone. The last part of the treatment was waiting for the pharmacy next door to open at 9:00am - and then the taxi home.

ACC later reimbursed me for the taxi fares, since I'd remembered to secure receipts. ACC also accepted that falling over a wooden box was an accident, so picked up part of the tab for the medical fees. Six weeks later I was declared well,

and ready for the physio-therapy - again to be subsidized by ACC. Unfortunately, rather than start the Physio, I crashed my car and ended up back in hospital - conveyed this time by an ambulance that **was** considered necessary.

Because we are made of physical stuff, sometimes we do need medical care. Sometimes the medical infrastructure is ready to receive us. Sometimes the system is sufficiently under stress for it to respond only slowly. And in some parts of the world, if you're injured, then that's just . . . unfortunate. It is said "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including . . . medical care".

**Lesson:** John 5: 2-9a

**Reflection:** Who put all those sick people there?

The healing facility **is** there. Goodness knows how it works, since to modern ears it sounds like snake oil - bathe in the waters and suddenly be well. (Next thing they'll be installing bath houses in Rotorua, even as the sulphur corrodes the pipes immediately.) Put that to one side for now. In First Century Jerusalem, the reputation of the pool at Bethesda was sufficient to attract all manner of people seeking healing. Scholars of the Hebrew language note that the pools had two names - Bethesda and Beth-zatha. Similar sounding names, but one of them resonating with the healing waters (positive), the other resonating with the public unpleasantness of a pile of wounded people cluttering up the footpaths - goodness me, haven't they let the neighbourhood go! We don't like to see that kind of thing in public. Anyway, among the people some would rather not see, is someone who's been trying to get into the water for years and years. Seemingly, the waters only heal when they're stirred up, and only those who get there first can benefit. The trouble with this man is that his condition makes him slow; every time he "runs" for the stirring waters, others prove quicker and beat him to it. Through the night at the medical centre, the staff become available, then unavailable - triaging puts others in front of you. The night passes. This man's night has turned into thirty eight years. And you know, by the time you've waited 38 years, it's clear that you're never going to be healed. That's basically what the man says when Jesus asks him.

One possible version for how the story now would go, would involve Jesus (and maybe a disciple or two) picking the man up - using their speed to beat the others to the water - if the water is stirring today. Or maybe having a quiet word with others in the crowd who are quicker, greedier, more assertive. Negotiating, advocating at the bottle neck - convincing others to give up **their** current chance at healing. Jesus chooses not to do that. Instead, he simply tells the man to be well - and it works.

I wonder what this story might say to people of Christian conviction as they stand by people waiting in queues. We kind of understand what it means to advocate for people who aren't doing well in accessing health services. We make a bit of noise (toot if you love nurses). We explain situations by getting a sob-story out on Seven Sharp. We lobby government for more money for bigger pools and more porticoes. We make the point that our medics only begin their careers once they've accrued huge student debt, so are inclined to go overseas where the salaries are higher. We float ideas about offering fees reductions for people training in health sciences. We do **all** these kinds of things - the things that Jesus, at Bethesda, doesn't do. What are we to make of what he **does** do - speaking the Word of wellness? Does it stand for something we can't even see just yet? We might need to come back to that.

### **Music for Reflection:**

**Lesson:** John 11: 28-37

**Reflection:** Tears and love

Once again, it's a story about access. Mary sincerely believes that had Lazarus had access to Jesus (who heals people at Bethesda), then he wouldn't have died. He's died because Jesus was busy doing other things somewhere else. (The triage nurse saying "yes" and "no"; the medics who come and go during the night - so much to do, while at home, quietly, Lazarus slips away. These **are** the limits on the system.)

One wonders how it must have been for Jesus to hear Mary lovingly blame him - if you had been here, this death would not have occurred. Jesus sees her weeping. He sees all the others weeping. We are told that this greatly disturbed his spirit, and that he too then began to weep.

Some observers describe his weeping as too little too late - could he who opened the eyes of the blind man not have kept this man from dying! - a question suggesting dereliction of duty - crocodile tears. Others, though, see the tears, and say "wow - look at the love".

As tears fall, and the presence of great love is identified, the story turns back on itself. Tears and love become turning points for what kind of a story this is going to end up being - a story of life.

Again, it's not clear what this needs to mean to a Christian community that cannot raise the dead. Again, the question is "what as-yet-unseen thing does it call us to seek, as we try to honour that every human being has the right to access medical care?" A bigger system, more Messiahs on the ward - or something that grows from tears and love?

At the beginning of this month, we explored the issue of food. Contemplating the situation in Gaza, we heard from Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus. He said:

*"We do not need to wait for a declaration of famine in Gaza to know that people are already starving, sick and dying, while food and medicines are minutes away across the border."*

Perhaps that's where we become stuck, unless we add tears and love.

The second week, we looked at the photo of Phan Thi Kim Phuc, whose clothes had been incinerated off her body by Napalm. Perhaps that is where we become stuck, unless we add tears and love.

The third week, we pondered the intractable situation of the widow, the solo mother, the judging community that refuses to disburse resources because it suffers suspicion. Perhaps that is where we become stuck, unless we add tears and love.

In the fourth week, she calls me a "poor old thing", wraps me in a blanket, and gives me somewhere to sleep - because I added my own if not love, certainly tears.

I think a constant theme throughout this exploration of universal human rights has been the importance of humanising everything. Rights are not going to be protected, they're not going to be respected, they're not going to make a difference at all, so long as the world has no tears and love.

Simeon Brown will not appreciate my critique here. He won't find it helpful as he tinkers with our health system. He will note, and many will agree that the Church has brought nothing helpful to the current crisis.

Tears and love **turned** the story of Lazarus. Human rights are waiting to be humanized by a tide of tears and love.

A moment of quiet.

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