

Sermon Archive 557

Sunday 12 October, 2025

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Dealing with curse and blessing

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Lesson: Jeremiah 29: 1, 4-7

Reflection: Find the life

Before we do some imagining, let's do some history, just to anchor it all in things that really happened. In the year 587 BCE, Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon, the region now known as Iraq, sent vast armies down to crush the city of Jerusalem. Why? It was something to do with wider tensions with Egypt and continual refusals of Jerusalem to "pay tribute" - whatever that means. In the theatre of war, what things mean is sometimes indistinct, but "paying tribute" probably means more than tax, and more like pride. In the end though, does Nebuchadnezzar need to give a reason why he's invading? He's powerful, so probably not. His people invade, because he commands them to (absolute power). The Nebuchadnezzar people kill the movers and shakers. They leave all the old people, the untalented and the meek to live among the ruins (why waste energy on sustaining the un-strategic ones); and the not weak but not dangerous ones (the middle drawer people) they take away to their own country - they'll make a useful labour force. Kill the leaders; abandon the weak; kidnap the people of potential. The kidnap is called "exile". That's the history.

Now to the imagination. As an exile, you are aware that the precious symbols of your identity at home have been destroyed - and with them maybe your pride. You're aware that you're here in Babylon because you've been judged as not being too dangerous - shall we decode that as "not worth fearing"? How does that feel? What do you do with this situation? Maybe it's natural here to grow resentment. Many exiled people sow the seeds of resentment, and wait for the plants to grow. The plants are anger; they're broken spirit; they're spirituals to be sung for some unreachable day of freedom; a deep, deep sadness; a grinding to a halt. These are the fruits that exile grows - and the tendrils of the plants strangle and overwhelm.

The Word of God comes to the exiles, calling on them to start building houses. They should plant gardens. They should take wives, husbands, make babies. They should make of this bad situation a place where they can grow and turn strange and foreign and frightening context into a home. In this cursed place of exile and resentment, they are to give themselves to turning it into a home. Seek the welfare of the place in which you find yourself - pray for it until you find it gives you your welfare. How might that annoy those who have placed you here as a punishment? We won't give them the courtesy of asking them - because that may give them power. No, **we** take power by turning this misfortune into a good place in which to be. So says the Word of God. And if that means we need to search the landscape for fertile places to plant, if it means that we need to assess solid places into which to sink our foundations, if it means we need to find someone with whom we feel we could nurture a next generation, then that might require a maturity of searching. Sometimes it's hard to see through the wrong to find possibilities for right. **That** may be the challenge - reading the landscape for the possibilities of a future. So says the Word of God.

Shortly before he died, Kingi *Tūheitia Pōtatau Te Wherowhero VII* said that Māoridom's most strategic response to the forces fuelling the Treaty Principles Bill, and other government initiatives to suppress Māoritanga, was simply to be Māori all day, every day. Authentically be who you are today, in this place. Build your Māori house, plant your Māori garden, eat your Māori kai. Make your Māori life. Push back the things that might grow from your sense of being kidnapped to a strange land, and be calmly at home.

What does "being at home" mean when you're a Palestinian in Gaza? How do you put the argument for statehood, when one of the key requirements for statehood has been stable territory? Where are you meant to plant your garden? How do you be peacefully at home? The Word of God says there **has** to be a way, and calls us to find it.

And what does "being at home" mean when you are applying for refugee status in Aotearoa New Zealand, but Immigration New Zealand doesn't believe what you are telling them about the situation in your home country? The decision is to deport . . . Even as they send you "home", you're facing exile.

The first part of today's sermon is an engagement with those who are in bad situations. Bad situations often, these days, cause people to fight. You exile me, I'll exile you. You take my freedom, I'll take your freedom. For

every sin, another sin is given - and that's pretty much the history of the world. So, what we are to make of Jeremiah's word? The word that bids us hunker down in the wrong and to make within it a home? You know, plant what you can. Grow what you can. Give birth to what you can. Seek the welfare of the context, that you yourself within it might find welfare.

Where any sign of blessing is hard to find, and you clearly can see the curse, plant, grow, bless, pray, create welfare. Within the curse, bring life to the blessing.

Lesson: Luke 17: 11-19

Reflection: Give thanks for the life

This is not a time of curse. It's a time of most ridiculous blessing. Ten people have had an awful disease (a bit like being in exile from society), and every single one gets healed. In Jeremiah's world, everyone is cursed. In Jesus' world, everyone is blessed!

All of the blessed ones do what Jesus tells them to do - they take off to present themselves to the religious officials. One of them, though, turns back to acknowledge the One who has blessed him. The blessing is shared by all, but only one feels it proper, or natural, or right, or true to what has happened, to frame a "thank you" - and so to hear from Jesus - beyond skin-deep cures - that his faith has made him well. Jesus' observation that ten were made clean, but that only one has given thanks, gives shape to the other side of today's coin.

On one side of the coin is the challenge to humanity to work creatively within the curse. On the ***other*** side is the challenge to humanity to recognise when it is not cursed, but blessed. Might it be true that just as difficult a task as living creatively within the wrong, is the task of living gratefully within the right?

I'm going now to a wee reminiscence over my time of having a broken arm. When you have a broken arm, you can't put on your normal church clothes. So you have to wear a black preaching gown loaned with kindness by someone else. When you have a broken arm, you can't change the sheets on your bed. Well you can, but it takes a long time to do it. When you have a broken arm, you can't do up your fly, so have to wear track pants to Church Council meetings. You certainly can't mow the lawn, so have to rely on the kindness of your 80 year old neighbour to do the job. All of these

simple tasks become dreams - things of almost magical wonder - because you can't do them.

Well yesterday I mowed my lawn. I changed my sheets. I'm happy to say that today I've pulled up my fly, done up my belt. And as you can see, I'm wearing my regular outfit to church, because I now can feed my arms through my sleeves. None of these things I've done in my now-regular wellness have seemed like a blessing - even though they **are**. Nine out of ten don't stop to say "thank you Jesus". There's something here about how easily nine out of ten of us fail to see that extra thing that makes us well. Is there some kind of wellness beyond the mended arm that only comes when we perceive within it something that moves us to say "thank you"? The deeper healing power of God's having opened our eyes to the blessing? The enablement of gratitude.

-ooOoo-

It's been a sermon of two halves. On one side, the challenge to see through the curse to the possibility. The capacity to create a life within circumstances that are difficult. On the other side, the challenge not to be blind to the present blessing that might be ignored.

I don't know how those two challenges lie across how our lives are just now. Some of us probably are in the exile, needing to see the places where life might be grown. Some of us probably are in the having been blessed, and needing to be alerted to the blessings to which we've become blinded. You will know best where you are.

In the meantime, build your house. Plant your garden. Eat what you eat, and be who you are. Find your leprosy removed. Stop to give thanks.

God is good, and calls you on.

A moment of quiet.

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