

Sermon Archive 560

Sunday 23 November, 2025

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reading: Luke 23: 33-43

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Looking out the window of the train that takes me to the City of the Poor, a youth hostel in Lourdes, a religious pilgrimage site in the South of France, I see a range of hills with three big rugged crosses marking the line between hill and sky. Although it is sung that there was a green hill far away outside a city wall where the dear Lord was crucified, his was not the only cross. On either side of the one, two others are equally as real. Each has a story.

In this sermon, we look at the two outer crosses, what they have in common, what sets them apart, and how the cross in the middle speaks to them each.

-ooOoo-

What do the outer crosses have in common? They bear the weight of physical bodies that always were going to die. We are born. We live. We die. We wonder about how some people live for so long - the head of grey hair being a crown of glory. We grieve how some live for so short a span. It doesn't seem right. But whether life is long or short, the creature of clay will die. Should that prompt a protest from the outer crosses? Well, maybe a tear, rather than a protest . . .

What do the outer crosses have in common? Well, they're both erected by a system that feels a need to punish. I guess most societies have some form of punishment. **Ours** does. We fine people. We deprive them of things like driver's licences. Sometimes we send them to prison - some of them for a long time. We do these things for three reasons, I think. One, we do it to protect society - we know that some people are not safe to be at large in the community. Safety! Two, we do it to express our disapproval - maybe hoping that the disapproval will discourage others from causing damage in the future. The promotion of

community values. And three, sometimes we do it simply to vent our outrage - the pure catharsis of punishment. You hurt us; we'll hurt you.

In doing this, though, **our** society stops short of crucifying people. The last person to be executed for a crime in Aotearoa New Zealand was Whanganui famer, Walter Bolton, hanged in Mount Eden Prison in 1957 for murdering his wife. In the United States, 27 of the 50 states execute their citizens for crimes. Should that prompt a protest from the outer crosses? 27 states suggest "no". Our position suggests "yes".

What do the two crosses have in common? Each bears a person who must know (one of them certainly knows) that their lives have not been as they ought to have been. Maybe they launched into life from a place of intergenerational disadvantage. I guess you could be angry about that. Or maybe they **had** privilege and plenty, but that turned strange anyway and natural advantage wasn't enough for greedy eyes and hands - a sense of blessing squandered. That shouldn't make you angry, but is bound to make you sad - and sometimes sadness fuels anger. You know they say that anger is a secondary emotion - always some deeper thing behind it . . . What do the outer crosses have in common? They represent human beings for whom life hasn't worked out.

The last thing they have in common is that this story of theirs has confronted them with the figure of Jesus. They can't ignore him, pretend that he doesn't exist, because just as obviously publicly present in the world as **they** are, so also **he** is. As they are on display, with nowhere to hide, so he is on display, with nowhere to hide. He cannot be hidden.

Behind him, of course, so many stories spin and swirl. Surely this was the Son of God. This is my Son, the beloved; listen to him. You are the Christ, Son of the living God. I believe, Lord; help my unbelief. Myriad stories - mysteries so bright. And of course, no, it is better that one man should die for the people - a child of Beelzebub, arch blasphemer. All of this spins and swirls.

What have the outer crosses in common? The fact of the presence of the controversial Jesus in their world - with the attendant challenge of

sorting out what it means. As they used to say, is it mad, bad or God? That's not agreed by the outer two crosses - but they have in common that he is present in their world, even as they, these creatures of clay in a punitive world, are dying.

That's the common ground. Creatures of clay in a punitive world, mis-navigated lives to deep regret - working out who this king is as he hangs beside them.

-ooOoo-

What do they have that is **not** in common?

One of the men on an outer cross is described as "keeping on deriding" Jesus. Not a cry of panic that might find expression through a "one off curse", but a persistent deriding - as if fuelled, fed from somewhere angry - like in your moment of dying, why give the final flow of life to derision?

What, I wonder, do you hope your last words will be? I think we most might hope that they would be "thank you for this gift of life". Maybe the really lucky among us might aim for "thank you for loving me". Our better angels would want to save us from giving our final breaths to the deriding of others - particularly of others who are suffering with us. What fuels derision? What feeds the anger? How is the world hurt by the crimes of those whose anger is hateful?

The other thing from **this** cross is that its creature of clay sees in Jesus only a source of power: "are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us". It's an echo of what the wider crowd have been shouting as part of their derision. It blames him for the situation. It mocks him for being weak (when maybe he's being strong). It refuses to see the wider picture in which justice and life and glory are given in a different court of judgment. Who is the One on the central cross? Just someone who's weak, defeated, to be derided. Again, I wonder, what feeds this kind of response to the love God showed us in Christ? There is much to be fixed for the creatures of clay.

Shall we go to another cross?

From the other cross, the creature of clay does not see Jesus as a failed source of power. Nor does he see Jesus as someone who has done something wrong. He sees Jesus as innocent - as someone who **has** lived the life that we all ought to have lived. Whether from the disadvantage of circumstances, or from the heights of heavenly origins - he has lived as he ought. His words are not of derision, hating the other. His words are a plea for the forgiveness of those who wrong him. How do we want the last words to go? They reveal the heart - and this observer from the second cross observes something glorious from the central cross.

The important thing, though, I think, is that the second creature of clay recognises in this glory something not of this present moment of injustice, but something of a kingdom yet to come. This creature of clay sees in his fellow sufferer a "king". The service is called "Two Criminals and a King".

"Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom".

Jesus replies "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise".

"This is my Son, the beloved; listen to him. You are the Christ, Son of the living God. I believe, Lord; help my unbelief. Myriad stories - mysteries so bright." The creature of clay, in the world of punishment and derision, sees next to him not a criminal, but a king. He asks for mercy, and is reassured of paradise.

Normally, at sermon's end I call for a moment of quiet. Today, I call for us to sing the Taizé chant, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom". Then one minute of silence, and the following hymn.