

Sermon Archive 561

Sunday 30 November, 2025

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reflections for Advent Sunday

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



A Comment: An Unhappy Valley

In July, the One News team at Television New Zealand investigated a local news story from Waiwera Valley, just North of Auckland. The report went like this:

A 16-metre Buddha statue is set to disrupt the peace and tranquillity of a small rural community in Waiwera Valley.

Residents of the area . . . said they weren't consulted about the sculpture – and because the council considered it art, no resource consent was needed. While the statue is currently still under construction, it will soon tower over the Waiwera Valley hilltop, much to the dismay of some neighbouring residents.

"The size is just... that's monstrous for a valley like this," said Waiwera Valley Action Group spokesperson David Pennington. The structure is a representation of Buddhist master Guru Rinpoche, and belongs to Jeta's Grove Charitable Trust. Pennington argued the statue is going to be "very visible from all the properties around here".

"It's going to be bright gold which just doesn't make sense in a rural environment."

Residents only learned of the building plans in recent months. After raising concerns with the council, they were told the piece had been accepted as artwork under the Auckland Unitary Plan. "It's a faithful replication of, apparently, an image of Guru Rinpoche. To my mind, that describes a religious instalment. It doesn't describe art," Pennington said.

In a statement, the council said artwork is permitted in rural zones without a consent as long as it complies with other controls, which the statue does. However, if the structure is used as a site of worship, a resource consent would be required. The council also said it is currently investigating reports of gatherings at the site, after footage of what appeared to be a Buddhist ceremony was captured by a resident.

Pennington said concern around possible gatherings was also raised with the council. "Their response was 'they are allowed six such events per year'," he said. "There's a hole in the council planning bylaws which allows people within a rural production area to call something art and therefore be allowed to proceed with it without notification to the public and to my mind, that's just wrong."

My comments:

Mr Pennington says that the statue is not an artwork; it's a devotional object, designed for use in religious gatherings. He also claims that he has no problem with the object's religious character - just with its aesthetics. Sixteen metres of gold isn't a good fit for a rural setting. I kind of "get" that - to the extent that were someone to build a giant golden statue across from my house, I think I would want to be consulted - especially if the object was designed to attract crowds. I'm not NIMBY bashing David Pennington.

My persisting concern, though, is about whether, if the statue had been of a golden Jesus, or of a golden Prime Minister, or a golden sheep dog (rural setting), maybe the neighbours wouldn't have objected. A giant statue of a figure from another culture reminds us that our demographics are changing, diversity is advancing, we are hearing many languages now, and our song book is filling up with treasures strange and new.

And for some of us, that is threatening.

I think that is the pebble in my shoe when I consider what might really be going on in Waiwera. Did you know, by the way, that "Waiwera" in te reo Māori, means "hot water"?

I think it might be time for a Bible reading.

Bible Lesson: Isaiah 2: 1-5

Sermon: A Compelling Mountain

On another hill, in another place, a structure is built - looks a bit like a temple. It's built as an expression of a particular culture, all caught up with that culture's religion and pride. Does it belong there? On that hill, visible to all the other nations? We're told it's taking on a new height, rising above other hills. We're not talking physical height (the mountain isn't growing). We're talking cultural profile, we're talking national pride, talking how the people of this built thing feel they stand among the other peoples. Is that serving the neighbourhood well? Is it a good fit? As one culture rises, is there room perhaps for conflict or offence?

Well, if we put on our historian hats, we'll note that that particular structure was reduced to rubble by Babylonians asserting **their** authority. It's replacement was destroyed by Romans, who had their own ideas about which culture was boss. We'll note too that the site itself, without its temple, now is contested cultural territory - with the Dome of the Rock now its main feature (is the Dome a mosque, isn't it a mosque, or is it an artwork?). Not a happy history.

And if we put on our "current events" hat, we'll note that the government of the people of the god whose house was on that holy hill is doing little to advance us along the road towards the New World. "There is no starvation in Gaza" it says. "We are not using food as a military tool", it says. "We do not commit war crimes", it says.

One way of making **our** "mountain" higher than the mountains of our neighbours, is by fortifying it. And I reckon the year 2025 will be remembered, I think, as the year in which most Western governments agreed to increase their military spending. Part of the reasoning was that the world is a hostile place, and part was our reckoning that our traditional safety mechanisms (alliances with powerful nations) were now unreliable. We needed our own muscle to flex. Concerned for our peace and security, we chose again the model of the balance of terror - if not the use of violence, at least the subtle pointing to the existence of the gun in our holster. That has long been the way of the world - to increase the height of our mountain.

But, concerning the height of the mountain, Isaiah's not speaking of "the way of the world". Isaiah is presenting quite a different vision. Isaiah's hill is taking on a new height because something going on there is being recognized by the people of the world as just, as fair and proper, in a hope attracting way. While in other places, your fate is a function of whether others are richer than you, more well connected than you, more in the cultural mould than you, **here**, on **God's** mountain, it's about what is fair - it's about what is just. And this sense of justice being present causes the nations to stream to the hill. Not compelled, not required, not driven - but attracted by the good, towards the New World.

Also heightening the hill is a sense of the hill's being a repudiation of violence. When people stream to this place, it's like their spears morph into pruning forks, their swords melt into gardening shears. On other hills we stab one another. But here, we tend the garden. We plant crops, we press the grapes, we share the food. This place becomes a beacon of hope for the coming of the New World, because everyone can see that it's a place of peace. Not terror finely balanced. Not suspicion of our neighbours - and their funny golden statues. Not proving our power by starving the children. But by being at peace. They say "let us go

up to THAT house, because **that** house is a house of peace. It wins their hearts - towards the New World - this hallowing of peace.

-ooOoo-

Finishing soon!

Many times recently, I've found myself in conversation with people who are longing for the world to be made new. Common to our conversation has been an expression something along the lines of "but what, under the scale of the mess, can we possibly do?"

Well, today, because my heart has been won by a vision of justice and of peace, I'm going to do four small things:

1. I'll pray for peace and friendship and understanding among the neighbours of the Waiwera Valley - and maybe greet my own neighbours with peace.
2. I'll put some food in the basket, to feed if not a starving child in Gaza, then maybe a hungry adult in Ōtautahi.
3. I will break bread and lift the cup among those who are gathered to listen for wisdom - sharing what's on the table, just because we can.

The fourth small thing I'll do is remember that we are attending to the theme "Towards the New World", because we're journeying through the Season of Advent. Advent is for people who understand that the work of reconciling the world (healing it, restoring it, re-creating it, blessing it, giving thanks for it) began in the coming of Christ - but only just **began**. Advent is about our longing for his coming again, that the work might be completed. Perhaps on **this** side of that coming again, that completing (how ever we imagine it), our longing for the new world will always have a touch of sadness to it. We're not there yet.

Yet, Advent faith, Advent hope, calls us to consider how the work began as Christ touched the world with his human hands. We make ourselves available to be his body, the body of the One who began. Week by week in Advent, as we light our candles, we say "Bring in your new world, O God, **FOR WE WAIT IN HOPE.**"

And wait in hope we do, and keep a moment of quiet.

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