

## Sermon Archive 585

Sunday 10 May, 2026

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reading: John 14: 15-21

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



I do not speak of things of which I should not speak. All the stories I will tell here have already been told to this community with the permission of the friends and family of those about whom I speak.

-ooOoo-

*I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.*

In October of 2019, the community of Knox Ōtautahi gathered to give thanks for the life of someone called Barbara. Barbara grew up in the small railway town of Taumarunui, where her father worked for the railways. Notice I said "Barbara grew up there", rather than that it was her home. At her funeral it was noted that her early years weren't happy, and that as soon as she could, really, she packed her bags, took herself off to Dunedin to go to Deaconess College. By memory, she was seventeen or eighteen at the time. Barbara didn't eventually become a deaconess, choosing instead to become a teacher - although you could say that in the shape of her life and its emphases of community and service, she really was a deaconess in spirit. Barbara had a quiet manner, but the silences that formed around any invitation to speak of childhood in Taumarunui were powerful. Without words, she made clear (with a deep silence) that it was not her home. Love was not wrapped around her there. Seeking community, a place to grow into who she was, she went somewhere else - her church was her family. In the church she made long-lasting, abiding friendship. In church she found a love that enabled her to stand. Christ says "I will not leave you orphaned;

I am coming to you". Hearing this, believing this, claiming it herself by receiving the Christ who comes, Barbara lived the rest of her life.

*I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.*

In August of 2023, the community of Knox Ōtautahi gathered to give thanks for the life of someone called Bob. In the opening prayer of the funeral, the presiding minister said this: "From the little boy who had few people functioning well to care for him, to the resourceful one carving out a teenage life that made well for him, to the hearing of a call to serve the church in ministry, to the formation of a family . . ."

I forget the detail of the eulogies, but the thrust of it was that Bob's childhood had been rocky. I think he was something like seven years old when his home (in the form of an unwell mother and a non-coping father) required him to leave. I think there was time with extended family (a bit fragile and awkward), time in boarding schools (which he liked because it was non-chaotic), a time of fending for himself (of which he was profoundly proud). At a gathering of young people, Bob heard of the Christ who "gathers us in", and gave himself to being gathered. He trained for ministry. All the ministries he conducted in various parts of the country were all characterised by an emphasis on warmth, caring and community. Bob had a great sanctuary manner, preached as someone on a journey of discovery - but the thing most celebrated in his life of ministry was "church as family" - Christ says "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you". Hearing this, believing this, claiming it himself by receiving the Christ who comes, Bob lived a life of warmth and community. He found a home.

*I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.*

In July of 2024, the community of Knox Ōtautahi gathered to give thanks for the life of someone called Lola. You, having noticed how this sermon theme is developing, will not be surprised to hear that Lola's childhood also featured absent parents. From an early

age, Lola was effectively orphaned. I did not know any of this until I heard it at the funeral - but suddenly I realised where her tenacious drive came from. As a girl, she'd had to make things happen - no loving parent was going to do that for her. Substituting for the family she didn't have was the community of a little church in Blackball (of all places) - hotel not yet formerly called the Hilton, Salami factory, long history of mining and the Union movement. Marrying Blackball's brand new, freshly ordained minister, one Alistair Kimball Bathgate, Lola began her life of being what in olden days they called "the lady of the manse". Life filled up with friends, parishioners, people from the community. While her family effectively had abandoned her, gracious space and place was given to her by this thing called "the church". Christ says "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you". Hearing this, believing this, claiming it herself by receiving the Christ who comes, Lola became the immensely engaged person she was (poetry, politics, hospitality, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, be true in and to the important things). Life in community, to which she was immensely committed - he does not leave us orphaned.

When Jesus tells his disciples that he will not leave them orphaned (drawing on the image of the orphan), what is he trying to say? What is the nature of the orphan that makes him choose it?

The orphan lives in the absence of someone who unconditionally is on their side. It's not the absence of a cheer-leading that approves of everything. It's more the absence of a desire for growth and success - a profoundly biased hope that comes from love. So this missing thing is mentoring, advocacy - the Advocate will be with you forever. In the embodying of the One who does not leave us, can the community of Christ offer that?

The orphan lives in the absence of someone who provides the structure in which learning for life is provided. This is how to tie a shoe lace. This is how to use a knife and fork without embarrassing yourself. This is how to comb your hair, and this is

how to forgive the one who growls at you for not combing your hair. If you love me, you will obey my commandments - this is how we live. In the embodying of the One who does not leave us, can the community of Christ offer that?

The orphan lives in the absence of the ageing form of itself. This is how you will look when you have more years on the clock. This is how your expressions may soften. This is how you will be when you, yourself, are full of years. A vision of who we are becoming, what we might hope or forgive or repay for kindness. An inspiring in the younger one of the hope that experience may bring wisdom. (The world will not see me, but you will see me. Because I love, you also will live.) In the embodying of the One who does not leave us, can the community of Christ offer that?

The orphan is one who engages with these absences while they are still vulnerable. Most of us, eventually, are orphans - but hopefully only after we have been equipped to fend for ourselves . . . Fend for ourselves? Is that quite right? Or is Jesus trying to describe a kind of life when none of us are fending for ourselves, but rather are engaging with this kind of community in which we understand that we are never alone. "I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you". "You know him because he abides with you, and will be in you". Pope Benedict XVI once said "One who prays is never alone!. Never alone! As we embody the One who does not leave us, can the community of Christ make people to be "never alone"?

-ooOoo-

There we are. Three local orphans find community in Christ. Christ says he will not leave us orphaned. The church listens for what the Spirit is saying. And we keep a moment of quiet.

The Knox Church website is at: <http://www.knoxchurch.co.nz.html> . Sermons are to be found under News / Sermons.