

## Sermon Archive 589

Sunday 7 June, 2026

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reflections on UNUDHR - Articles 1 & 2

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



**KNOX CHURCH**

love faith outreach community justice

### **Lesson:** Genesis 2: 408

The Reverend Don Knight, known by some Knox people who've been here longer than I have, was once the minister of the parish of Napier West, where I (as a student minister) was sent to spend ten weeks learning from an experienced minister. I was twenty three years old, and Don wasn't. The main piece of advice I recall him giving me was "don't rush around the sanctuary in church. Take time going to the pulpit. Bring some dignity to the occasion".

***Dignity*** . . . What is it? The young man, raising his black fist against racism in the United States - does he have dignity? The Pope, saying that he won't be drawn into silly exchanges with other powers, but will speak the gospel unstintingly - does he have dignity? The elderly person, who has fallen once already, to the breaking of her elbows, yet works to master her walking frame - does she have dignity? And how about the new born baby - nothing in her kete of achievement yet, other than being alive, does she have dignity?

I wonder whether there might be two kinds of dignity. One spins around the brave young black man, the principled Pope, the elderly person in recovery. It's a matter of facing difficult circumstances with principle, with pride, with courage. It feels like it's about rising above difficulty, to claim your true potential. Doing what you should. It's about working, serving, rising, keeping your head, being your best. Dignity.

What of the dignity of the new-born? In the new-born there is nothing of achievement. It's more like something inherent. She has the finger print of the Creator on her - and that gives her a dignity. Dignity, here, is more like the significance of a small artwork made by a famous artist. According to the delightful creation drama of Genesis, she's both dust from the ground, but also someone wondrous "bearing the image" - and it's all very good. Does "being a work of the Creator" give dignity? Or is some emerging (or refining)

of the image - so the artist is more recognisable in the work- required, before we point to it and say "dignity"?

I think I believe that we all, as children of God, have an inherent dignity. The new-born - she deserves not just love (although love is never "just"), but also respect. I think I believe, also though, that we have a faith responsibility to nurture one another, so that we can **grow** in dignity. And I think "growing in dignity" is something like helping one another to become all that we were created to be. So that there may be fulfilment, there may be pride, there may be peace about who we are - a knowing that we've done our best - that we have not squandered our gift of life. Dignity might involve a slower pace in the sanctuary - but more so, it must involve become a proud expression of who God wants us to be. I think that's what Christians might consider to be "dignity".

In 1948, wanting the world to do better than it had done during the Second World War, the United Nations declared that all people were equal in dignity and rights. And I think the equality of rights was about allowing all people a path to realising their dignity. Equality was considered to be the best principle for that to happen - such that all people to find dignity.

I draw your attention to a wee cartoon. There's a game going on, over the fence, which everyone wants to enjoy. The trouble is that there's a fence. It's no problem to the tall person. The tall person can see and enjoy the game without any help. It's more of a problem to the middle-sized person, who with some tippy toes still can see the game. Can he enjoy it as much as the tall person? Not sure - depends on how good he is at activating the tippy toes and maintaining them. Then there is the short person - shorter than the fence. There's no way he can see the game. All he does is notice that others, with the advantage of height, are having a good time. The enjoyment of others might make his experience worse - more resentful. Maybe the taller ones can tell him what's happening, help him out - if they care to. Will that let him in?

The cartoon explores how resources can be deployed in light of this variety of privilege.

In the left frame, we see "reality". In reality, the advantaged tend to access more than they need. They have nothing to overcome, really, but resources tend to fall into their laps anyway.

In the second frame, a model of equal treatment kicks in. Everyone is given **one** box on which to stand. Equal treatment for everyone - because, you know, that's kind of like a basic democratic principle, isn't it? Maybe, but it's still not enough for the shortest person.

In the third frame, equity kicks in. It comes from a different place. It comes from a place that realises that disadvantage is real, and that some people actually need extra help to see over the fence. Why give people an equal box, when it won't create access to the enjoyment of the game.

In the fourth frame, called "justice", boxes are not needed, because the fence has been removed.

I feel no desperate need to exegete the life out of the cartoon. I leave the four frames to you, just to think about. As you think, consider the story of a God who creates the human being, and puts the human being into a garden which is designed not just to be beautiful in itself (though it is), but also to give the human being everything required to live and flourish. It seems to be the desire of the creative God that the people should fulfil their potential - that they should take their inherent dignity of being works of the Creator, and grow!

Meanwhile, as they think about equality in dignity and rights, God's co-creators might care to consider the following:

Human beings are free and equal in dignity and rights - without distinction of any kind, such as **race**. In Aotearoa New Zealand, life expectancy for Māori is 75.8 years; compared with non-Māori at 83, that is seven years short. How do God's people help dignity to grow?

Human beings are free and equal in dignity and rights - without distinction of any kind, such as **sex**. The national pay disparity between women and men in our country is 5.2%. Equal people doing equal work - 5.2% difference. One metric for measuring this is that each year, compared with men, women stop getting paid for the year on 8 November. How do God's people help dignity to grow?

Human beings are free and equal in dignity and rights - without distinction of any kind, such as **religion**. I don't know what to say about this, other than that 51 people in our city were killed seven years ago because of their religion. How do God's people help dignity in this world to grow?

Human beings are free and equal in dignity and rights - without distinction of any kind, such as ***political or other opinion***. It is considered that much of the geopolitical tension in our world, causing war and economic stress all around our world, is growing from a culture where there is no middle ground, but increasing intolerance around diversity of political opinion. How do God's people help dignity to grow?

Human beings - they are free and equal in dignity and rights - without distinction of any kind, such as ***national or social origin***. More about this in two weeks time; but for now we note that immigration has been identified by some political parties as a major election issue. A turbaned Mr Singh is assaulted on his daily walk along the footpath, and he doesn't know why. How do God's people help dignity to grow? Does the assailant of Mr Singh have inherent dignity that might have become lost? If so, how might it be grown?

Human beings are free and equal in dignity and rights - without distinction of any kind, such as property, birth or other status. My mind goes to matters pertaining to birth. I go to the case of Immigration New Zealand ordering five year old Aidhan Nithin, to be deported, because he's autistic, so compromises the Acceptable Standard of Health requirements. This is how he was born. How do God's people help dignity to grow?

Human beings are free and equal in dignity and rights - without distinction of any kind, such as property, birth or other status. Other status? My mind goes next to something within our own church. If you are a rainbow person, then the Presbyterian Church will not ordain you into the ministry of Word and Sacrament. Equal? Do we have dignity? How do God's people help dignity to grow?

Back to the cartoon. Reality is the picture. Also in the picture is the response of providing equality - a good step. Another step is advocating for equity. Another further step is moving towards justice - where the fence is removed entirely - so that all might enjoy the game.

Our recurring question has been "how do God's people help dignity to grow?"

Before we attend to this in our prayers, we keep a moment of quiet.

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