

Sermon Archive 597

Sunday 2 August, 2026

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reflections for Peace Sunday

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



An Introduction: The Elephant is in the Room

Miriama Kamo and Mark Crysel ran the popular current affairs programme "Sunday" for many years. They each and separately won awards for their work. In 2024, during a major restructure at TVNZ, they were thanked for their contribution and liberated to explore exciting new possibilities somewhere else. Although it's probably the goal of any television journalist to try to grow and audience, the downside is that when redundancy comes along, it happens in front a nationwide audience. Miriama and Mark are in the room to do a couple of interviews.

Also in the room is Golriz Ghahraman, to talk about her very public fall from the grace afforded her through election to parliament. Golriz was the Green MP who got "done" for shop lifting. It transpired that her shop-lifting was a Post Traumatic Stress Disorder response not so much to her experience as an Iranian refugee, as much as from her experience of waves of hate mail and death threats from an invisible group of online haters. She says that when you're being called rubbish, worthless, bad all day, every day, you begin to feel like a bad person, and subconsciously start looking for ways to punish yourself. She shop-lifted with such obviousness, it was clear she was self-sabotaging. It was a form of self-harm.

While she now understands the psychology of the situation, she is still ashamed of what she did. She is sad about the Iranian community who were proud that one of their own had been elected to parliament. She realises that refugees and "women of colour" also felt let down - one of us is doing well, what an encouragement ! O! How embarrassing, disappointing and sad. Where did the pride and hope go? She's had to give much work to processing the line between guilt (you **did** something bad) and shame (you **are** something bad). That's a work in progress.

Asked whether she is lost forever now to public service, she made the point that she never wants to re-enter parliament, but that the public can be served from

other, quieter, non-elected kinds of spaces. She concedes that most of the public will never trust her again. She says that she's not looking for a "redemption arc"; she feels she doesn't deserve redemption. She's just seeking peace.

Also in the room is Tory Whanau, the first wāhine Māori to be elected Mayor of Wellington. Tory speaks of using alcohol to deal with the stress of her public role, and of how that only made things worse. She admits that she drank too much and was insufficiently Mayoral in a number of restaurants. She says also, though, that a couple of true allegations led then to a wave of bizarre and untrue ones - including the one about committing a lewd act in a pub. She speaks about what it's like to walk into a public function, knowing that others are thinking about the drinking she did, and the lewd act she didn't do. She says it's hard; she tends to stay at home, and only go out for things that are absolutely necessary. Like Golriz, Tory speaks of how she feels she has not only brought shame upon herself, but upon those who identified with her - a young Māori woman doing well in an old white blokes game - all the young Māori girls who might have seen her and formed aspirations. She said her experience of public shame had brought a new depth to her - older, wiser, more empathetic. But realising that these new depths mightn't appeal to much of the public, she decided not to stand for Mayor again.

Is she lost to public service? Well, although she didn't run for Mayor, she **did** campaign for election as a councillor in Wellington's Māori ward. She was unsuccessful.

Also in the room is Dr Tanveer Ahmed, a clinical psychologist based in Sydney. His previous career was in journalism. That ended when he was found to be a serial plagiarist. He makes no denial of what he did. He's not really in the room to repeat what Golriz and Tory have said about not feeling deserving of forgiveness. He's there to talk about the psychology of shame, and also about how communities **could** work (if they wanted) at developing ways of re-integrating people who carry shame. He notes that society has many public mechanisms for condemning, but very few ways of restoring. Golriz doesn't want restoration - she does want peace. On Peace Sunday, we ask "should we, as community, form ways that bring people to peace?" And if we should, how to do it?

The Gospel Lesson: John 7:53 - 8:11

Three Short Reflections

(1) After the shame, peace?

I wonder what happened to the woman Jesus forgave. Do you think she stepped back into community life with renewed confidence, her head held high? Do you think she suddenly became free from people staring or continuing to whisper? Do you think what happened that day took from her the lingering thoughts (within) that she didn't deserve to be at peace? It would be nice to think so.

Why did Jesus declare her forgiven? The reading itself doesn't say why. It does have Jesus doodling with his finger in the dust on the ground. He comes across as someone in the midst of thinking things through. There's nothing for **him** in her being forgiven. What's he going to say? The next thing he does is invite the members of the community to consider their own track records. Are you, yourselves, entirely sure that you haven't drunk too much at the restaurant, haven't pinched from the handbag rack, haven't borrowed an idea and pretended that it was yours? You audit yourself, he says, before you keep someone else trapped in condemnation. Is it an appeal to the community's empathy? That seems to be the direction he's taking.

What causes him to want to go that way? As we say, there's nothing in it for him. Is it that he sees himself on a pilgrimage with a God whose nature it is to forgive? Is it like he can't be true on that journey, or to that journey, while not offering others a second chance? (Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.) We don't know for sure. "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She says "no one, sir". "Neither do I condemn you, and from now on, do not sin again." In the world of Jesus, after the shame, peace.

(2) After the death, life?

The publicly condemned One was punished, killed and laid in a tomb. Did he deserve it? While his friends thought not, the official system believed he did. Society processed the matter, and that was the end of it.

On the third day, God undoes it. God does not undo what has happened. God does not undo the scars that are left. But God undoes the death. Death will not be the end of this, the beloved Son. He will live again, speak again, inspire again, call again. After the death, life!

Why did God give Jesus life after the death? Some of us might be inclined to feel that it's because Jesus was innocent of the things for which he'd been condemned. Maybe that's right, because Jesus was innocent, and there had been an injustice. The trouble is that that won't help us make progress with dealing with those who have done wrong. Neither Golriz, nor Tory, nor

Tanveer claim innocence - so innocence won't help them move on from shame. Maybe a better way ahead would be to consider that maybe God gave life to Jesus not because of justice, but because of love. When love bleeds into the frame, forgiveness has a more likely advance. I love you, so I wish for you the second chance, the giving of good news, the coming again of life.

Do we love Golriz, Tory and Tanveer? Maybe not, but does God? If so, how can we deny them peace? On Peace Sunday, after the death, in the world of Jesus, the giving of life!

(3) Blessed are the peacemakers?

Who are the children of God? The ones, who when you look at them move you to say "ah yes, I see the likeness!" The ones in whom you see the family resemblance - those expressions, gestures, family phrases and echoes of character that remind you of the parent. The ones who, when you see them, assure you that the line still continues. Who are they?

"Well", says Jesus, "they're the peacemakers". That's who they are.

When we are making peace (Golriz doesn't want a redemption arc - she wants peace), we are being children of God. What makes for peace? Is it judgment, or forgiveness? Is it repeating the accusations, or speaking a new Word? Is it secretly hoping that Tory will stay hidden, so we don't have to deal with her? Or is it saying "neither do I condemn you, so go and since no more"? And people having a second chance at life . . .

We cannot undo what has been done. But perhaps it is very true indeed, that people of Christian commitment need to explore ways to help God's creatures move from shame to new life. Perhaps it is true that God calls us to make ways so that people might find peace.

-ooOoo-

Unceremoniously dumped journalists, parliamentary shoplifters, Mayoral tipplers, plagiarists are in the room. The elephant is in the room. We are in the room - and on Peace Sunday, God is calling.

A moment of quiet.

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