

Sermon Archive 607

Sunday 18 October, 2026

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reflection for Heritage Week

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



An Introduction: Time for the love to be offered

It was said of the preacher-teacher from Nazareth that he had this overflowing sense of love - love for God and love for people. That sense had been planted within him at the beginning of all things, and growing since the time he came into the world. By now, he'd drawn around him some Spirit-blown people, born of the gospel. They found in him the turning of strangers into friends, of enemies into lovers, of outcasts into prodigals in the arms of the "forgiving father". The overflowing love of preacher-teacher had given them something precious and new, like a sword beaten into a ploughshare, like a new answer to "who is my mother?" Now, as the overflowing-ness overflowed from where their small community could contain it, it was time for them to share the blessing with others. The world was waiting. So he sent them out. A reading from Luke, chapter 10.

Lesson: Luke 10: 1-9

Reflection: A local story

He couldn't have sent them out with lots of security and resources, because they didn't have security and resources. Instead, he sent them out with pretty much the opposite: no purse, no bag, no sandals - otherwise read as no money, no infrastructure, no protection. When you're conveying love, is there something necessary about going in vulnerability? Love comes not in power, but in risk. It comes not in certainty, but in hope. Love comes not with the task complete, but with something new to build together once we have really met. We have no purse, so we think. We have no bag, so we share. We have no sandals, so we walk together through the dust and stones.

I think when love comes, the beginning must be tender. When love comes, the building of the future is a softness of heart. What appears later as solid brick and mortar often has origins in tenderness.

Here's a story for History Week.

Prayer

Reflection: . . . continued

The growth of the city of Christchurch was both thrilling and also concerning the people of St Paul's Presbyterian Church in town. Who isn't thrilled (maybe proud) when the city is attracting others, and the shops and factories are humming along? It's good to be part of a success story. But, O my goodness, all those extra people - and where to put them! *[The plan had been that it all would fit within four avenues. Fendalton was outside the city - Fendall Town (a separate town). Papanui wasn't a suburb - it was a timber town (separate town).]* These were outliers beyond Christchurch proper. But all the success within the city, all the growth - all the people. By the 1870s, Christchurch people (not Fendalton people, or Papanui people - who didn't really count) were spilling outside the avenues. At St Paul's, the concern drifted towards the poor souls settling North of Bealey Ave - in the area called the "North Belt". How could they study the Bible? Where would their children go to Sunday School? How would they learn to sing the Lord's songs?

19 November 1876, St Paul's conducted its first Sunday School classes in the Odd-Fellows' Hall in Montreal Street. Very much in the spirit of no purse, no bag, no sandals, this little love-seeking experiment began. What did we say about the necessity of love coming in vulnerability? Will it sink or swim? Will it live or die? How will it go? At this point it happened in a rented space, because there were no funds to build a house. I guess the project began in hope.

By 1878 (two years later) St Paul's made a request to the Presbytery (the regional body) that church services be held, alongside the Sunday School classes at the Odd-Fellows' Hall. The regional church's response was something along the lines of "good idea; sorry no money or people available". Budget records of the regional church from 1879 have the princely sum of "One Pound" set aside for church services in the North Belt. Interestingly, that one pound entry was made in pencil (rather than

ink) - perhaps an indication that the future of the project was far from certain. It might have been rubbed out later when reality revealed no "one pound" becoming available. Love comes in vulnerability. No purse, no bad, no sandals - just a desire to share some life.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the world in Dublin, Ireland (where the Spirit of God also was blowing), a young minister by the name of David McKee received a letter. Perhaps the letter sat on his desk for a while, next to other letters from his doctors suggesting he get out of damp Dublin, where his lungs were not benefitting from the Irish inclination for rain and dampness. "Dear Mr McKee, will you entertain relocating to the other side of the world to see what you could do for a Sunday School and service in an Odd-Fellows' Hall? The sun always shines here. It hardly ever rains. And whether or not that is true, there is a people of hope here, hoping that you'll come."

February 1880, he came. With his wife and many children, to the newly formed North Belt parish he came. No guarantees, of course. No purse, no bag, no sandals. But he came anyway. This is the nature of love - it's vulnerability and hope. Love comes not in power. It comes not with certainty. It comes with a willingness to discover, together, in community, what together can be built. Near the corner of Bealey Avenue and Victoria Street, what will they build?

Sadly, while the people of this place loved David McKee, they did so for only a short time. The lungs which did not prosper in Dublin, neither prospered here. Six months after he arrived, he died - and was buried in the Addington cemetery in Selwyn Street, home also to Robert Erwin (minister Number Three) and Kate Shepherd - and various others who didn't qualify to rest eternally with the Anglicans in Barbadoes Street. The burial plot was purchased for the McKees by the congregation of the North Belt Church - and a house was found for Mrs McKee (and her nine children).

Love begins in vulnerability. There is no purse, bag or sandal. There are no guarantees. But love does what it does - and even as time ticks on, it is remembered with our love. Love is met by love. Love begets love. Love never ends. The house is built on love.

This reminds me of a second reading.

Lesson: 1 Corinthians 13: 1-13

Reflection: House and the contents of gladness

It's Heritage Week, and I guess in Heritage Week people of a place explore the physical heritage - fabulous old buildings that tell us stories of where we came from, and what we were like way back then. The fabulous old building built by the people of the North Belt, who renamed themselves "Knox" in 1904, stood here from 1902 until felled by a series of earthquakes in 2011. Love then turned its hand to the work of restoration - of mending what had been broken. Many heritage features inside the house have been maintained. The house still speaks of where we've come from. It still carries our stories. To this place people ceased to arrive by horse and foot - beginning to travel by automobile. Outside this place, street lights moved from gas to electricity. In this place, people prayed for their sons, who served in the war to end all wars. In this place, people prayed for those whose livelihoods disappeared in the Great Depression. In this place, more prayers were prayed for more sons at war - even though the last war was the war to end all war. From this place, protests were launched about nuclear tests in the Pacific, rugby tours, rainbow marriage, papers on Treaty Principles Bills. The wainscot panelling, the vaulted ceiling, the less-than-comfortable pews gave room for all these things - and to the songs of a people of faith. Going past the place, the heritage enthusiast will see a building, and give thanks for heritage. We also give thanks for heritage. But for us, our gladness is that it is a house for the God of love.

The small, the vulnerable - no purse, no bag, no sandal. The building of something we can only build together. The overflowing overflowing-ness of the preacher-teacher from Nazareth, whose tender love changed the world.

Anthem: I was glad

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