

“The last will be first and the first will be last” a sermon preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 20 September 2020 by Jordan Redding.

I. Why is it that, when we’re in a brightly lit room at nighttime, we can’t see anything outside? It’s because your eyes adjust to the amount of light in the room. If you turn out the lights, your eyes adjust to the darkness and suddenly you can see outside far better. I read a delightful book a few years ago called, “Mr. God, this is Anna”, by Fynn. It tells the story of an unlikely friendship between a man called Fynn and a young girl called Anna. In her childlike mind, Anna sees the world in a whole different way and so helps Fynn to also see things differently. There’s one scene where Anna says to Fynn:

“The sun is nice but it lights things up so much that you can't see very far... The night time is better. It stretches your soul to the stars.”

There’s an irony here. Too much light can actually limit and shorten your vision. It can blind us to the whole reality. In the daylight you can see everything within a few kilometres. But when it’s dark on a cloudless night, your vision can stretch millions of light years to distant stars.

I want us to keep that image in mind as I reflect this morning on *privilege*. What is privilege? It’s one of those words we hear a lot about at the moment, often to talk about the favourable conditions that certain groups in society enjoy. Because it’s talking about whole groups, it inevitably generalises. But the generalisations point to an increased awareness in our society that our systems and structures are skewed to favour certain people over others.

One of the difficulties about addressing some of the systemic privileges in our society is that, for those who enjoy privilege, it’s often very difficult to recognise that privilege in the first place because it’s just normal life. It’s like being in a brightly lit room. We can see everything clearly. Everything is within reach. But within the confines of the room. Outside, all we see is a black abyss. Not even that... when it’s dark outside and you look out a window you see your own reflection staring back at you.

II. It seems to me that both our Bible readings today are speaking to people with privilege, encouraging them to step out from their brightly lit room, step out from under the ceiling, so that their vision can expand and stretch to the stars.

In fact, I would argue that’s a common thread that runs through the whole Bible. The story of the people of Israel in the Old Testament is one of constantly

expanding horizons of what to expect from God. The other day I was driving back from Christchurch. You know those long stretches of road between Ashburton and Timaru? You keep driving and the horizon keeps on expanding before you. By the time you get to the “old” horizon, there is a new one lying before you. It’s like that with Israel. God leads Israel on a journey. They are a people shaped by the promises of God. And while those promises are fulfilled, they’re never exhausted. It’s as if God is constantly saying, “yes *and...*” Their expectation of who God is constantly breaking its banks.

One of the fascinating developments in Israel’s history, is that they begin to see God as the God of all nations and peoples, and the God of all creation. In parts of Isaiah and Jeremiah, for instance, we hear about God’s plan to save all nations. This shift in Israel’s thinking was remarkable. In the ancient middle-east, Israel was only a small nation state among many others constantly warring with one another. It doesn’t make sense in a dog-eat-dog where Israel is constantly fighting for its survival to include its enemies and oppressors in its understanding of salvation. There is a challenge for Israel to see their special relationship with God not as a mark of privilege but as a mark of service and witness of God’s love to all people and to all creatures.

III. The reason I give that rather long introduction is because that’s the background for the book of Jonah. The book of Jonah is a short story in the same literary tradition as the parables of Jesus. It’s a story directed at the people of Israel who were struggling to understand the expansiveness of God’s love to include all people. Jonah represents the people of Israel. When the people of Nineveh, these non-Israelites, repent, Jonah is angry. Angry enough to die! And we can perhaps understand why when we look at the history of the people of Israel. They had been taken over by empire after empire. The Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks. These people destroyed our nation, killed our people, robbed us of our identity... and now God wants to save them, to include them in this redemption which is supposed to be ours? We can see that the horizon of what the people of Israel expect from God is expanding in an uncomfortable way. Come out from the house, God is saying. Look up to the stars and see how numerous are the descendants of Abraham!

Jesus is the fulfilment of this promise, the end of this trajectory in the Old Testament. In him, God’s salvation spills over to include all people and creatures. In him, we see a glimpse, the promise, of the new heaven and earth to come, the fulfilment of all we can hope for from God, the renewal of all things.

IV. But here's the catch. In order for us to see the stars, in order for us to dream and participate in that new heaven and earth, we first need to turn out the lights. As Anna said, at night time your soul can stretch to the stars. But as long as we leave the lights on, our souls will only stretch as far as the four walls we inhabit! Our humanity is at stake here. How large do we want our souls to be?

I was thinking about that image and I realised the starlight is already there. It's always there, day and night. Just as the promise of God's coming future has already been given in Jesus Christ. God's coming salvation is the horizon to which all things are directed. That doesn't change. The stars continue to shine. But we can live blinded to that reality. We can live with the lights on.

Perhaps that's why Jesus concludes his parable with the well-known line, "the last will be first and the first will be last." It's the switching off of the lights. The great reversal of the way things are so that we begin to see beyond the confines of our own privilege and power. It's not enough that the last get included at the very end. It's not enough even that the last get paid the same amount as the first. No, the last must get paid first so that the wrongs are set right; so that those who have enjoyed privilege awaken to the fact that their privilege counts for nothing before God; so that justice can be done. The lights must be switched off, so that those who have enjoyed privilege can learn to look to the stars.

I want to suggest that this process of "switching off the lights" will not be an easy process. In fact, for those who have enjoyed privilege, it will be a remarkably painful process. I want to name two brief examples, by way of conclusion: First, our global response to climate change. The West have enjoyed the fruits of industrialisation. And now various countries in the South and East are wanting the same privileges to lift their people out of poverty. Problem is that largely because of Western growth and expansion, the world is on the brink of ecological collapse. We have enjoyed working all day and reaping the benefits and now we're scandalised that others should demand the same benefits. What does it mean to hear once more the words of Jesus that the last shall be first and the first shall be last?

Second, the relationship between Pākehā and Māori. This week is *te wiki o te reo Māori* (Māori language week). It's a small gesture in the ongoing commitment to recognise Māori language and culture and to continue on the path of reconciliation as treaty partners. I say it's a small gesture because one week dedicated to *te reo Māori* points to the fact that there are 51 other weeks in which we prioritise English by default. The issue of privilege with regard to treaty issues and Māori-Pākehā relations is immensely complex. But I want to

suggest, given how hard it is to see privilege if you're enjoying it, that Pākehā like myself would do well to listen for a bit and to move forward in humility as we hear again the words of Jesus that the last shall be first and the first shall be last.

So may we be in the business of switching off lights, not so that we're all in the dark, but so that our souls can stretch together to the stars. Amen.

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