

“Joy in the midst of threat”, a sermon based on Isaiah 25:6-10a, Philippians 4:1-9 and Matthew 22:1-14, preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on 11 October 2020.

We’re coming to the end of a strange year. Many of us are tired from continually having to adapt to changing requirements, requirements we support because we need to restrict the spread of the virus, but it doesn’t reduce the stress of uncertainty – are we doing enough to protect ourselves and others? In feeling like that, I noticed this verse in Isaiah 25: “And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations.” A shroud has been cast over us and we long for it be removed. Each reading today speaks of threats to be ended and each offers hope, hope that is utterly realistic.

Isaiah represents the tradition that sees creation always under threat of chaos and nothingness. The threat stands in opposition to God and if God does not attend to creation, if creation is not under the rule of God, then the threat prevails. While God has the upper hand, God is not fully in control and from time to time creation goes awry. For Isaiah, the threat of nothingness is always present, undermining hope: the power of death, of havoc, of disorder is on the loose breeding fear. In the face of that threat, Isaiah proclaims that God will pay special attention to creation, reclaiming it to be a feast for life. “On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines ... “

The promise is not an empty political one, that a vaccine will soon arrive, before the end of the year, and everything will be all right. Nor is it a promise that we will stagger over the line exhausted. The promise is that we will thrive, that the shroud of fear and despair will be destroyed, that we will be able to feast on life. In the meantime, we are to wait eagerly and actively and prayerfully so that God might save us.

Joy is the by-product of such waiting, the by-product of faith and hope, even when the threat persists. In the midst of COVID-19 and the likelihood it will stay with us for a long time, there is a deeper quality called joy that can be hours amid the threat.

The passage in Philippians comes in a context of threat, the threat of a death sentence, of disunity in the church and of hostility outside it. This letter comes from a prisoner awaiting a possible death sentence and whose letters to his followers put him and them at risk. The Roman police scrutinise each letter and at times censor them. The police also monitor the recipients of the letter and there are people watching who are hostile and ready to report any disloyal comment. It was dangerous to write and to receive such a letter. Paul is in military custody which allows him to receive visitors and money, but he is in continual discomfort. In a prison without fresh air: dark, filthy and unhealthy. He would have suffered greatly, physically tortured with beatings and whippings and subjected to mental torture such as insults and threats. He will have been chained to one or two soldiers, either with his arms and hands or feet. He will have dictated the letter or paid a soldier to unchain him enough to write the letter himself. It seems he is anxious and worried, worried about his weakness, worried about what sentence he will receive, worried about the readers of the letter struggling to cope without him and the hostility around them. He will have been hungry because prisoners were not well fed. Even if he is released, he faces ongoing scrutiny for the same reason he was imprisoned - because a private citizen did not like something he said and reported him to the Roman police.

In this threatening situation, Paul wanted to encourage the Philippian community which made up of and led mainly by women. Women were not usually named unless they were notable or notorious. And here Paul names Euodia and Syntyche, notable women in the Christian movement in Philippi who may have been in charge of community ministries. There may have been conflict about the direction of the church so Paul urged the leaders to ensure the conflict did not become personal. In that troubled context, Paul encourages the whole community to rejoice. In such threatening circumstances, it seems strange to speak of joy. Elsa Tamez points out that it is a common theme among prisoners facing death. She writes this – “In the midst of misfortune, persecution, and possible death sentences, prisoners draw strength from writing or talking about joy in order to deal with both present and future pain ... they tell their recipients to let go of the sadness brought on by imprisonment and persecution, and they encourage them to rejoice ...” It is

possible to rejoice in the midst of hostility and to reach out to others even when the situation is dire. Despite the Romans having imprisoned him and that they could kill him, Paul wanted to find some common ground with them. So he uses concepts they would support, perhaps to show his good intent.

So he writes about values that are both Christian and Roman: “Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things ...” If the censors see this, they may be more sympathetic than otherwise. Joy persists in the face of threat.

The parable in Matthew is full of threat. It is soaked in violence, the seizing and mistreatment and murdering of slaves. The sending of troops, the killing of murderers, the burning of the city. The binding of people hand and foot, throwing them into outer darkness. Because the circumstances of Matthew’s community was tough. A background to Matthew’s community is that in 70AD the Temple was destroyed.

The centre of Jewish faith, the sustaining institution, was desecrated. Matthew’s community would have had a vivid memory of an oppressive ruler destroying a most valued religious institution. A violent, anti-Jewish, imperial act of violence by what seemed an unstoppable power. In such a context, despite the desecrating of the holy, despite abandoning the centre of faith, despite people turning from what is good and true and just, the parable speak of a God who keeps inviting people to the feast of life. Even when people refuse an invitation, here is one who keeps finding good and bad people to accept the invitation. And when the invitation is accepted, and the feast is ready, asks us to dress so we can enjoy the feast. And what does that dress look like? “Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just ... think about these things ...”

The good news is that in the face of threat, the invitation to the feast keeps being issued. Joy is not dependent on the circumstances in which we live. It is a by-product of faith and hope. It survives in prison in the face of death – rejoice Paul says, again I say rejoice. The invitation to the feast of life keeps being issued, and we are to dress to share in it.

An American army officer was in Tegel prison when Bonhoeffer was led out to be executed by the Nazis in April 1944, just days before the prisoners were discovered and set free by the Allied forces. The officer watched Bonhoeffer being led out to what he knew was his execution. The officer said later that the quality he noticed most about Bonhoeffer was very unexpected and very surprising. It was joy.

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