

## Sermon Archive 224

Sunday 2 December, 2018

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Psalm 25: 1-10

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Look at the photo on the front of your order of service.

[http://www.knoxchurch.co.nz/data/oos/201812020000\\_Remember%20not.pdf](http://www.knoxchurch.co.nz/data/oos/201812020000_Remember%20not.pdf)

The poor young thing! How old is he? Sixteen or seventeen? I don't know. He's old enough to have a facebook profile - onto which he's posted this photo. Under his right eye there's a wee line. Maybe it says "I didn't sleep well last night". He **does** look tired. His hair's a mess - not anywhere near ready for the day. He's holding his hand to his head - as if there might be an ache inside. Why would that be, young man? Have you been living unwisely? Making foolish choices late into the wee small hours? And there are the piercings - one in the nose, two in the lower lip. I call this image "the bad piercing day", after the more established "bad hair day". It's an image of a young person toppling into selfie-shot, looking like he's wondering what on earth has just happened to him - wearing the imprints of some fairly silly decisions. What happened last night? What happened in the last few months? Why am I holding my head? What does this photo show about me? He's just a young "fella".

*"Remember not, O Lord, the sins of my youth."*

-ooOoo-

There's something, isn't there, about that phrase "the sins of my youth". The things we do, the decisions we make, when we're not really ready yet for grown-up decision-making. There's something of the sense of the person still under construction - but having to navigate a world that's tricky and complicated already anyway. It's almost a picture of life saying "here I come, ready or not". Have you developed discernment yet? Here I come. Do you understand the subtle textures of moral complexity? Here I come. Are you experienced? Here I come - ready or not.

The Jesuits famously said "give me a child until he is seven, and I will give you

the man". (Forgive the sexist language!) The Jewish community celebrates the thirteenth birthday, and receives the teenager into adulthood. Western culture gives young people access to fast-running vehicles, contraception, alcohol, a vote - years before, according to the neurologists, the brain is fully formed. And it can be argued quite well, that in giving adult responsibilities to younger ones, you're providing exactly the right environment for growth to occur. On the other side of the coin, though, is that sad story about a bereaved oldest sibling having to take on parenting responsibilities for the younger ones - how having to grow up quickly empties life of the naïve delights of proper childhood. There are stories of long-term effects, life-long consequences, for people who came into contact with the justice system early in life. (The red flag on the file. The conviction that prevents them from travelling or entering certain professions.) There are stories of people carrying huge guilt about things they did when they were just too young to choose wisely. *Remember not, O Lord, the sins of my youth.*

In the first half of the Seventeenth Century, René Descartes spoke for the whole enlightenment movement when he said "I think, therefore I am". The human being finds its identity, its being, through the act of thought. We are thinkers. We are rational. We are the mind. In the Dark Ages we might well have been superstitious and frightened. We might well have been grubby, irrational and small - one of the animals. But now we had woken up. Our minds had taken wing. Who am I? What distinguishes me from other living things? It is my mind - my capacity to reason. And as the reformed religious tradition took its lead, there was now no excuse for me to hide in the mysteries of the sacraments given to me by priests speaking mysterious Latin. Now the scriptures were to be read in a language I really spoke. I was to take responsibility for listening and understanding. I was expected now to work out my own salvation - stand as an individual before God. It's all very grown up.

*Rouse thee, my fainting soul, and **play the man**; and through such waning span, of life and thought as still has to be trod, prepare to meet thy God. [John Henry Newman: the Dream of Gerontius.]*

I can't meet my God. My hair's a mess; I'm holding my head; making bad decisions right into the night. *Remember not, O Lord, the sins of my youth.* I wasn't ready yet. Humanity the erring, unready youth.

Robert Oppenheimer was a brilliant scientist. He had a tremendous brain. But

was he ready? Describing the moment when he and his colleagues saw the first nuclear detonation in 1945 (which **they** had created), he said:

*We knew the world would not be the same. A few people laughed, a few people cried. Most people were silent. I remembered the line from the Hindu scripture, the Bhagavad Gita; Vishnu is trying to persuade the Prince that he should do his duty and, to impress him, takes on his multi-armed form and says, 'Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.' I suppose we all thought that, one way or another.*

Capable of remarkable science. Capable of huge technological advances. Suddenly aware that we hadn't been ready to make the right decision. Suddenly aware that we're still quite young - babies concerning important things, "being in the world" things, God things. No matter how old and clever, still at heart a youth. *Remember not, O Lord, the sins of my youth.*

To the sins of youth come various models of God.

God, the judge, is appalled. This god endowed us with intelligence, and can't believe what we're doing with it. "I won't forget this" says god; "you ought to be ashamed; I'll meet your treachery with disappointment. I'll give you gloating enemies. Humanity, you loser; I'll give you humiliation!" Thank you, God the judge.

Hard on that god's heels, God, the easy dispenser of meaningless grace is also on hand. This god looks at what we've done, shrugs and says "O well". Then noticing some wounds on the body of someone called Jesus, wonders if it hasn't all been a bit indifferent, easy. God then wanders off into the world to look again at the consequences. On this exploration of the world, God will find silver coins, crowing roosters, denials. On this journey, called incarnation, called the passion, called the revelation of God's heart through human suffering, this god may well change - grow up, become wise, learn something other than perfunctory forgiveness. This God might become softened through knowledge, made beautiful through fellow-feeling. This God might become One to whom a psalm could be addressed: "show me your ways, O Lord, and teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth and teach me." This may become a God before whom cringing humanity become teachable, hopeful humanity, and learns to sing. This God will know the sins of our youth - the things we did or failed to do because humanity

really isn't ready, isn't fully formed, isn't yet bearing the image of God in a grown-up way.

But the God to whom the psalmist looks is One who looks not only upon the **sins** of the people, but looks within Godself for compassion and love. There is within this God a love and faithfulness - a patience and deep knowledge - that enables fools to grow beyond the sins of our youth, into the humble doing of the right. *Remember not, O Lord, the sins of my youth; remember me according to your love and for the sake of your goodness. You guide the humble in doing right, and teach your way to the lowly.*" As God evolves into this listening, reflecting, forgiving, hoping God, humanity finds a teachable new posture to take.

People of God, I wonder what would happen if we were to put on the nature of the God whom we see in the psalm - the nature of the God who remembers not the sins of our youth, but who teaches and grows the human being within love and forgiveness.

What would our court systems and our prisons begin to look like? How would our government budget priorities change? What would our international politics do? What would Descartes have humanity say other than I **think** therefore I am? I love? I care? I forgive? I serve? I let go of past wrong, I listen, I understand - and therefore I **am**. "Non cogito, sed amo, ergo sum".

-ooOoo-

There it is. A picture of humanity. How old is he? Sixteen or seventeen? Under his right eye there's a line. His hair's a mess. He's holding his hand to his head. Have you been living unwisely? Making foolish choices late into the wee small hours? What happened? What does this photo show? He's just a young fella - the sins of our youth - the final word?

Yet to you, O Lord, I lift up my soul; my God, I put my trust in you. You guide the humble in doing right; you teach your way to the lowly. And in your grace we grow. Show me your ways, O Lord, and teach me - that in your grace, I may grow.

We keep a moment of quiet.

The Knox Church website is at: <http://www.knoxchurch.co.nz.html> . Sermons are to be found under News / Sermons.