

## Sermon Archive 310

Sunday 13 September, 2020

Knox Church, Christchurch

Reading, Reflections and pieces

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



**A Reading:** Psalm 27: 4-5, 13

**A Reflection:** William notices

Once upon a time, sometime in the Springtime, William was taking a stroll, and stumbled upon a field of flowers. Flowers are the shape they are, and the colour they are, to attract flying insects which carry pollen from one plant to another, thus cross-fertilizing the plants and ensuring a next generation of growth. It's a practical survival thing - their way of being in the great reproductive stream of not dying out.

One supposes that William knew this - the purpose of flowers. He attended St John's College at Cambridge University at a time when scholarship in botany and evolution was taking off. Just up the road from St John's, Christ's College was getting ready to receive a student called Charles Darwin. Science was on a roll - as strangely also was the Romantic poetry movement which, actually, is where William fits in.

Back from his walk among the flowers (the effectively evolved pollen attracters), William finds himself remembering them. He pens: "for oft upon my couch I lie, in vacant or in pensive mood, they flash upon my inward eye which is the bliss of solitude; and then my heart with pleasure fills, and dances with the daffodils."

For William, first of all, speaking to him most profoundly is not good design, or effective function, but beauty. Beauty is what makes his heart dance.

In the land of the living, when asked to identify his or her one great desire, the psalmist says it is to spend every day of life beholding the beauty of God. The high desire, the great goal for the human being, is the apprehension of beauty - to let the heart, as it were, go dancing.

I wonder why. Are we hard-wired for beauty? Is there something in beauty that resonates with the image we're said to bear - the nature of the beautiful creating One with whom we feel some kind of original connection? For form and colour, and texture and fragrance speak to us in ways that reason and logic and thought and ethics and engineering and design can't quite reach. There is something elemental, connecting,

dancing about what beauty does for us.

So when the world puts forth natural beauty, and when the earth seems full of life, William is not the only one with a dancing heart, not the only one to gather up memories of daffodils for later.

Thank God for the lovely. May we ever be grateful.

### **A Musical Response**

**A Reading:** Isaiah 40: 6-8

**A Reflection:** Thomas Rose no longer sings

The grass is soft and green - and good to walk on. The flower is bright and wonderful - delightful to the eye. And sometimes, also a God-given thing, the human voice is beautiful.

The documentary footage has Thomas Rose looking a bit like a fish out of water. All the other boys are dressed in their Eton collars, black ties and undergraduate gowns, getting ready for the annual choir photo. Bringing a splash of colour with his baggy, bright blue sweatshirt, Thomas stands a full head taller than the others. He's not dressed up, because he's not going to be in this photo.

Prompted by the interviewer, Thomas says: *"I left choir at Easter because my voice was going. It was OK before the Easter holidays, and I was actually ill over Easter. And I came back on Easter Sunday, and I couldn't sing very well; I just couldn't really sing. ["What was that like?"] Strange. Annoying sometimes, because you're trying, but it didn't come."*

One adult member of the choir is also interviewed. He says: *"I remember one time I was listening to a tape with my father, and there were really nice high floating top B flats - really high notes; it was a recording I'd done as a treble. And I just started crying, because you know it's just never going to be as easy as that again; it's always going to be hard work from now on, in a way that the voice production at least wasn't when I was a treble. And that's a loss, and you have to come to terms with that. And I wonder how much some of the younger ones realize that right now."*

A second adult member ponders the mystique of the choir boy's voice: *"there's no particular reason" he says, "why a boy treble should be preferable to a girl treble, because personally I've never heard a set of girl trebles who have had the same kind of training, over six years. So there must be some kind of fascination with the image, or something. Just maybe it's something to do with the fact that the treble voice is only temporary - his voice is going to change shortly - so it's precious for that*

*reason."*

Grass withers, flowers fade - but it doesn't make the world less beautiful. Perhaps it makes it **more** beautiful. And that we are made of perishable stuff, and that saying 'goodbye' is something we sometimes have to do, makes us and the life we share, no less beautiful.

Thomas Rose doesn't sing anymore - the flower fades. But God continues, in the renewal of the earth, to bless us with beauty. Blessed by the word of our God.

### **A Musical Response**

**A Reading:** 1 Samuel 16: 6-11

**A Reflection:** As lovely as a flower?

Still in the realm of physically enshrined beauty, Michelangelo is sitting at his desk, considering his plans for the large abandoned block of marble so far featuring only rudimentary feet and the bottom part of two legs. The block had been abandoned twenty-something years earlier, when for political and practical reasons, two previous sculptors stepped down. Looking at the "givens" of his material (the feet and partial legs), Michelangelo (then 26 years old) has to be wondering "what should David look like?" The Bible stories of David present him, as a boy, as being fresh-faced, small, with nice eyes. The story of him coming up against Goliath, the Philistine giant, presents him as still very small - so much so that everyone knew he would lose the fight. Michelangelo, nevertheless, came up with this huge colossus of a man - veins sticking out from his forearm, a ripped set of abdominals, thick neck, huge head - a classic rendition of the striding heroic nude. Was that creative license, a complete missing of the David narrative, or confirmation that Michelangelo quite enjoyed big naked men (which apparently he did)?

But back to the Bible story in question! While Samuel, sent to find a new king for the nation, falls into the trap of thinking that beauty (if beauty be a qualification for significance) is something external, God makes the point to him, that a more important thing, here, is inner beauty. The significant expression of human beauty, such that it honours and serves God, is a matter of a "beauty of heart". In the morning I shave my face; I comb my hair; I choose clothes that I like. Do I check my heart? If I am kind today, forgiving today, if I am generous today - will there then be a human beauty to match the beauty of the flowers in Spring?

That Spring might encourage us, rather than condemn us by unflattering comparison, we check the heart. We are called by beauty, to beauty - but a beauty of the heart.

## **A Musical Response**

**A Reading:** Philippians 4: 8-9

**A Reflection:** Fed by the beautiful

In Reflection One, it's William Wordsworth. His mother died quite young, when William was just a boy. His sole-charge father was apparently lacking warmth but abounding in scariness. While he ended up at Cambridge, his early schooling was at a very poor, unappealing school. William essentially was brought up by strangers, none of whom cared much for him, and his early life was fairly hard - maybe ugly. Yet flowers came into his eye, made his heart dance and set up a home in his memory. Beauty was a blessing.

In Reflection Two, Thomas Rose no longer sings - or maybe he does again, some years later, several octaves lower. He's certainly not done any solo-work as an adult - not that I can find. But he participated in the creation of exquisite sounds - maybe made all the more beautiful because they didn't last forever. I don't imagine that his music-making experience for much of his boyhood wouldn't have deeply affected who he became, and saw his role as a "creative". Beauty was a blessing.

In Reflection Three we have Michelangelo, affirming the beauty of the human being, but kind of missing the point of the story. Flying shards of marble, stone dust in the workshop, arguments about the final positioning of the work. But so much art, so much creative flowering. Beauty was a blessing – such that we're beholding it still five hundred years later. Beauty is spoken into human lives, and the wise take time to notice, to participate, to be formed by it.

In our city, at this time of year, beauty grows around us. It comes to us. Some of us rush by, not seeing, or seeing but dismissing it as passing. It doesn't touch the sides. But for you, you people of God - whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, think about these things. Hold them in that dancing heart of yours. As we receive what is beautiful, we are improved - so says Paul, an apostle of God.

Beautiful things are given for our delight. Don't be afraid to look! Beautiful things, and our capacity to enjoy them, are signs of our being held in creative love. On Spring Flower Sunday, singing, we give thanks for the beauty of the earth.

**Hymn:** For the beauty of the earth

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