

Sermon Archive 488

Sunday 9 June, 2024

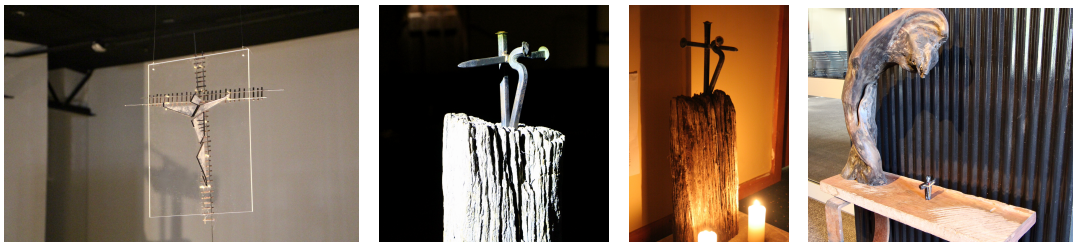
Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reflections on 3 Majendie artworks

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Larger versions of the images referred to in the reflections are at:
http://www.knoxchurch.co.nz/data/oos/202406090000_2024.06.09 - Cong lite.pdf



Reading: John 19: 16b-22

Reflection: Railroaded

Click clack. I'm remembering a train journey. Mother, father, two boys and a girl are going from Auckland to Wellington on whatever the night time version of the Silver Star was. Click clack, sound track to the holiday moving of the family. Sitting in the seat, as the view from the window moves from the back fences of those whose South Auckland houses are too close for comfort to the rail lines (mesh curtains, toilet windows, kids playing in the back yard) to Waikato pasture and mid-island mountains in the distance. Stopping here and there at stations with white bread sandwiches and sensible railway cups for tea or coffee. Then off on another stretch of scenery of grass and sheep and tussock and bush. The adults figure things out for the transition from day into night - especially with respect to sleeping arrangements. Given that the seats for five will turn into beds for two-and-a-half in sleeping compartments, we need to divide the family up. One cabin of twins will be for boy number one and boy number two. (Boy number two falls asleep to the sound of click clack. It stays with him as one of his childhood memories.) Mother and daughter will be cabin number two. Father steps forward to be outside the family, knowing that he'll be joined in his cabin in the middle of the night by the "Man from Marton". Henceforth, we keep the "man from Marton" as a kind of code for whoever just gets accommodated into our family shape. Click clack click. The bells. The rocking of the train and the crisp sheets of the bunk. I'm just a boy, and overnight the train track is taking me from home to holiday, from home to adventure - along the track.

Click clack (fast forward). Just before the days ended when you could travel South from Dunedin by train (the Southerner), the choir of Knox Church, Ōtepoti, piled onto a carriage at the Dunedin railway station. Headed for Invercargill we were, to be billeted by friends and church people, to sing a Saturday night concert, and a Sunday morning service at the ever-famous Italiano-Byzantine-styled First Church. Pre Occupational Safety and Health, the buffet carriage brings us lots of gin and tonic. We eat chips and talk a lot of rubbish - and very much enjoy being on a journey. At Balclutha we see from our windows three young gentlemen showing us their bare bottoms - three in a nice straight row. I wonder where those bottoms are these days, 36 years later. Maybe teaching similar mooning techniques to their grandchildren (do people do that anymore?) Anyway, the church choir click clack clicks its way to Invercargill. I'm accommodated at the First Church manse. We sing a good concert, and an unmemorable service. There's an unfortunate event involving some frosty ground, a running boy called Duncan, and an unyielding rusty waratah pole. It all adds to that strange fabric of shared experience that keep us friends through the passing of the years. Along the tracks we go - here to there - fuel for the group of friends we are.

We move from history now, to the realm of theological imagination. At some mystical place or not-place where inner lives meet and the Triune God emerges (click clack click), our travelling trains (the Silver Star and the Southerner) come to a cross road. You have to stop at crossroads, otherwise the explosion is terrible. So we stop. Of course we stop.

At the intersection we find this figure on the tracks - someone crucified. See the picture! Arms stretched out, head bowed. Kink to the knee - he's collapsing, he is. Whichever way your train goes, you're going to run into him. North to South you'll mangle him totally. East to West will do the job. Whatever the direction or trajectory of your travel - it'll do the job on this figure at the crossing of the tracks (wrong side of the tracks, right side of the tracks [disadvantage and privilege], off the tracks [criminality] - this figure on the tracks.

From the window of my halted carriage, I (the twenty something on the Southerner) see the adventure boy in the other train (the Silver Star) looking out his window. I see him, but I don't think he sees me (we don't see into our future - or do we? We certainly peer back into the past). All of us, though, see the head-bowed person dying at our intersection. Maybe that *is* our future . . .

Click, clack, click. Where the boy's train meets the man's train, and "then" meets "later" (and we wonder from now), and life experiences cross paths (where are we going?), the Christ is lifted up. At the crossing of the crowded ways of life, "behold and see".

Hymn: Where cross the crowded ways of life

Reading: 1 Corinthians 1: 20-25

Reflection: The Cross man

It's called "Cross man", and I'm beginning to work out why. From the high contrast photo taken from the left (with the piercingly sharp end of the nail facing us, it's clearly a trio of nails - solid metal things designed to punch on through anything on their way to wherever they're going. The front one is fashioned - given curves that aren't so good for punching on through. You might say it's useless now for piercing anything - a nail wasted. From the angle and lighting of the first photo, it's clearly nails (two strong, one weak), and the cross shape isn't hard to see. Cross.

From the second photo, lighter contrast, taken from the right, it's less clearly nails. The front nail, with its curves, is now the "cross man". We see a bowed head, a slumping where there ought to be shoulders. We see knees quite buckled - and a sense life just recently gone. From the angle to the right, that's what's revealed. Man. Cross man.

So what is it? Someone said it's foolishness to the Greeks and a stumbling block to the Jews. Someone else said it's a mockery of the kingdom of this world. Someone else said it's the Holy Lamb of God. Someone else "people choosing darkness over light" - while the light is never defeated. Long, long the theories wend their way; and the wise would counsel perhaps against seeking a one sentence answer.

Is he steely? Is he crooked? Is he broken beyond proper use? Is he part of the cross or separate from it? Are any of us separate from our suffering - but also are any of us entirely defined only by it?

The Cross man asks questions about who we are, from what angle we most properly are interpreted, whether there is a perfect light in which we might be seen. The cross man - nail or human, ugly or beautiful, sad or victorious, heaven or earth? The ambiguous "Cross man"; behold and see.

Music for Reflection:

Reading: Mark 14: 55-64

Reflection: The Wave

Crucified, a tiny little figure looks this way - not backward to what's coming up from behind. Just as well, really, since his eyes probably wouldn't be big enough to see the scale of it. Then his heart would surely shudder - either that or say

"Oh well, there's nothing to be done". How's that great a wave ever not going to hit?

Let's go into our prayer life . . . Do we dare to pray that that great wave (look at its size, its momentum, its horrible resemblance to a striking snake) might somehow stop? Could we pray the freezing of the wave? **He** prays, of course, simply "not my will, but yours".

In all likelihood, in its current form, the wave isn't going to stop. So maybe we're best to work out how we're going to "go with it". Maybe turn our backs, setting ourselves to be flung forward with eyes open to where we're going . . . Maybe we can at least try to adjust the smaller details of how we're thrown within the inevitability.

I'm reminded of infamously fated Cassandra. In order to win her love, the god Apollo gave her the gift of prophecy. The "gift for love" thing didn't work - like money and power can buy you love? Enraged by the rejection, but unable to take the gift of prophecy back (not sure why he couldn't take it back), Apollo resolved to turn the gift into a curse - by adding to it a second gift. The second gift was for her never to be believed. Cassandra could see the future (describe it well); but when she spoke of it, she was never to be believed. If no one believes you, what are you going to do? You can't do anything. You might as well not speak at all. The wave is coming; she knows it; she can't save anyone. No wonder they say "poor Casandra". Maybe all she can do is turn her back to the wave . . .

There were, I think, certain moments in the life of Jesus which he knew were decisive - those critical turning points when he knew he was locking in his crucifixion. When you go into the temple and turn over the tables, there's no coming back from that. When the High Priest asks you if you are the Son of God, there's no coming back from saying "yes, I am". There's even that moment from last week's sermon, where he looks the heart-hardened Pharisees in the eye, and heals on the Sabbath. These are moments of the wave that's going to hit him - and the Cassandra like submission of power to what now cannot be achieved is "arch". The things we do that form the wave . . .

So there he is. His back to the enormous wave, his face towards where it will take him, the little Christ prepares for the wave.

Behold, and see . . .

Hymn: In the cross of Christ I glory

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