

Sermon Archive 489

Sunday 16 June, 2024

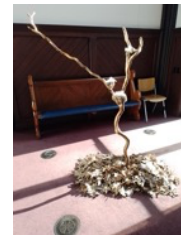
Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

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/202406160000_2024.06.16 - Cong lite.pdf



Reading: Isaiah 40: 6-11

Reflection: Leaves and Word

There's a flowering cherry tree in my garden in Papanui. It stands not so much proudly in the far corner, as much as shelteringly. Last year, when the Spring came, I wondered whether there weren't significantly fewer leaves on the tree than there had been the previous year (my first year tending the garden), so I had intense discussions with an expert at a garden centre about why that might have been. He told me that many large trees around the city seemed to be struggling because it had been so wet. He gave me some seemingly highly dangerous liquid to pour around to reduce the chance of root rot. I thanked him, came home, and administered the magic danger. So last year the leaves (or lack, thereof) gave me cause to be anxious . . . and to do some nourishing.

Following a year of using all their vitality to hang onto the tree, the leaves finally succumbed to the Autumn, turned a number of lovely colours, and fell onto the lawn - at first a few, then a lot, then the last remaining. Mid fall, I had to "pull into check" my dislike of disorderly clutter. All those leaves cluttering up the garden! I chose to focus on the fact that the green bin only gets picked up once a week, so no point could be found in raking things more regularly than that. I chose to focus on their lovely colours - that made my garden more beautiful by their presence. I chose also to think about how, if left in the raised beds, they'd become natural compost for the betterment of other plants.

Meanwhile, while I went through this leaf-inclusive affirmation fest, more leaves from the same tree were falling from Northerly boughs onto the footpath on Wyndham Street. I determined that these leaves posed a Health and Safety risk to those who walked along the footpath. In a spirit of public sensitivity, I raked up those particular leaves. This released the demon! Not being able to help myself, I took the rake to the garden, and to the leaves I had resolved to treat as "beautiful and useful for compost" - sweeping them up as quickly as I could into the groaning green bin.

So, the **lack** of leaves had made me anxious. The **abundance** of leaves made me frenetic. Around leaves, what a wonderful thing (and easily mocked) is this, the human being! We don't cope around leaves.

It's long been chronicled that human beings (particularly modern human beings) also don't cope well with the presence in life of death. We've professionalised the art of death - moving our dead bodies to the funeral directors, rather than keeping them at home. We say "pass away", rather than "died". Death isn't something we like - and maybe (just maybe) fallen Autumn leaves are reminders of what we're trying to avoid - the ephemerality of life.

Isaiah, who spoke of the flowers that fade, and the grass that withers, spoke also of some strange thing called the "Word of God". This Word introduces into our "dealing with Death" some reference to something spoken for all time which keeps all things in life. It's a First Testament (Jewish) text, of course, so it isn't informed with any resurrection light. But it begins to speak about something eternal slipping through into our consideration of flowers fading, grass withering, leaves falling.

In his Papanui garden, crazily raking up the disorderly leaves, the minister (a man of anxiety and obsessive orderliness) hears of the "Word of God": the flower fades, the grass withers; the Word of God stands forever.

Reading: 2 Corinthians 4: 16-18

Reflection: The colour of our world

Having spent some time looking at a Pete Majendie artwork in the church earlier in the day, I'm back at home, sitting (as I do) in my favourite chair. The Majendie work had had a kind of reproduction of Van Gogh's painting of Gauguin's chair (1888). I say "kind of reproduction", because although the shape of the chair (and the objects placed on it) is the same, it's been split in half. The left hand side is full of colour, and depth. The right hand side is an almost pasty black and white (or is it black and grey). And between the realm of colour and the realm of grey, a great dark space has found a home. A world of colour and a world of grey.

I'm sitting in my favourite chair (which is leather and brown), and as I say, I'm looking around the room. I have a vague feeling that I read somewhere that as one ages, one's perception of colour changes - and when I say "changes", I mean deteriorates. The eyes once capable of perceiving vividness lose that capacity - so our worlds become progressively less colourful. From my favourite chair, I'm looking at my room and wondering what it might have looked like to my ten year old self through my ten year old eyes. Are there visual delights in my room that now I just can't see?

Putting various questions to Mrs Google, I learn that a study has been done which confirms that colour leaves our eyes over time - particularly across the blue/yellow spectrum (as opposed the red/green spectrum that's a problem for many who suffer typical colour blindness). Happily, the study suggested that it might not be a problem for me for about another ten years. Major loss of colour tends not, it seems, to kick in typically until about the age of 70. So, it seems to me, that if I'm finding my world less colourful, rather less vivid or vibrant than it used to be, then maybe it's not about my eyes . . . which gives me new questions to put to the artwork by Pete Majendie. He presents one room, one chair in two ways - with one way being black and white (maybe grey), and another vibrant, colourful and deep. Ephemeral: the human eye? Or ephemeral, the human capacity to see delight in the world?

I mentioned my favourite brown leather chair. While domiciled in Maidstone Road, it sat fair and square for most of the day in the bright shiny Avonhead sun - gradually becoming drier to the touch and duller to the eye. In my current home, it's in a much more leather-friendly location. And just the other day, I applied some leather nourishing cream to it. It sucked it up, until I had no more left. I'm going to have to nourish it a whole lot more. It's good to nourish the dryness. It's good to nourish the brown. I hope I haven't left the nourishing too late. That's enough about my favourite chair.

Majendie's rendition of Van Gogh's Gauguin's chair calls me also to wondered about nourishment - the deepening of colours that maybe have faded - especially if the whole way that we see the world, as time ticks over, tends to fade to grey.

The Apostle Paul tells us that it would be wrong for us to lose heart - even as our outer nature is wasting away. Because he is sure that our inner nature is being renewed day by day. There is something in our following of the risen One that makes of our world a risen mystery. What's that that I see in the top left hand corner of the Majendie Gauguin's chair. It's a gas lamp on the wall. "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it . . ." [John 1:5] A person of ephemeral eyes, and maybe an ephemeral spirit, and so inclined to

see a world of grey, sitting on a fading chair, is told not to lose heart - for there is a renewing of the inner nurture.

Reading: Matthew 10: 26-31

Reflection: Sparrow value

A nest is built in a tree, because that which is to be placed in the nest needs to be kept away from the ground, where it might be crushed under foot or seized by a ground-level predator. Stoats and weasels, and cats and rats - put it up high, where it might have a chance to be safe. Make the nest out of things that you've foraged - twigs and moss and even fallen feathers, carried there in your tiny, little beak - Is that something like the wee boy with his finger in the hole in the dike? Some impossible challenge to use what you've got to save the world-of-things-you-care-for? Just get what you can - to make a home for that wee thing that once hatched really must survive.

The nest is not just shelter that comes to be. It's the artifact of a nurturing creature, driven by instinct to care, preserve, perpetuate. The nest is a miracle of caring. Within the nest, for the first part of its life, grows the sparrow. Its feathers grow; its wings grow; by a miracle of growth it becomes something that will chirp and fly, and be cunning enough to eat the grass seed I think I've hidden. Brilliant victory of resourceful life, the sparrow.

Yet it appears in humanity's narrative as something almost completely worthless. You can buy several for a penny, it's said. Which, yes, within the margin of commercial error is a zero-worth unit. Maybe our way of evaluating things needs a visit. Anthropocentric evaluation may be an issue.

Also within the secular anthropocentric evaluation is the suggestion that maybe some human beings also aren't worth all that much (redundancy, unemployment, cultural privilege, judgment). To that demeaning evaluation comes Jesus, the Christ, saying not only that the falling of a sparrow is hugely relevant to God, but how much more do we need to be assured that we are worth something.

In the eyes of the world, much is ephemeral: leaves; colour; delight; sparrows, human beings. In the Biblical narrative, which never shies away from how passing things are (life, like an ever rolling stream bears all her ones away), there **also** is promise of a Word that stands, of a renewal that engages, of a value that is held dear - and of a Christ who rises. Underneath the heavy printed first statement of the order of service, "Ephemera", the discerning eye notes the smaller printed word, "eternity". 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.