

Sermon Archive 551

Sunday 31 August, 2025

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch
Reflections for Spring Flower Sunday
Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Reading: Matthew 26: 6-13

Reflection: She shouldn't have done that

Indeed, the feeling in the room, among those with sensible heads, is that she shouldn't have done that. Shouldn't have done it because a woman shouldn't be touching a man - well, not a stranger, and not in public. Shouldn't have done it because like, who is she, and what's she doing here? No one seems to know her name. Shouldn't have done it, because that kind of perfume is valuable, and in our community we try to use wealth wisely - sell the perfume to some extravagant fool who's ripe for being parted from her money. Give the money to the poor or a welcome gift to the FBI. Shouldn't have done it, because now the smell has gone right through the entire house - like some great wave of pollen to get up the noses of the hay-feverish. There have got to be a million more strategic, less obviously **wasteful** ways to use the perfume. That **IS** the consensus - she shouldn't have done that.

Jesus disagrees. He describes what she's done as "a beautiful thing". What could be better than to do something beautiful? No, this will go down in history as something to be remembered, honoured, cherished. There we are . . .

Within the wider Christian tradition, our particular path fell along the strand that's generally called "reformed". Our "tipuna in faith" were those who felt like the church's way of worship had become too cluttered - like the incense had become so thick that it blocked the view. Why was church spoken in Latin, when we spoke "German", or "French" or "Scottish" - Scottish, not English! **Our** ancestors were the ones who wanted to hear the Bible speaking simply, and to us directly - rather than to those who wore white robes (whoops). Some of our people were so strongly of the opinion that clutter needed removing that they smashed the stained-glass windows, cancelled the choir, removed any adornment from the space within which God was praised.

England, Seventeenth Century; the Dean and Canons of Christchurch College, Oxford restored choir robes to their services. In the diary of one Anthony Wood, we read:

"On the night of 21 January 1661, some varlets of Christ Church took all the new surpluses issued to the choristers, and threw them in a common privy house belonging to Peckwater Quadrangle, and there with long sticks did thrust them down into the excrements. The next day, being discovered, they were taken up and washed; but so enraged were the dean and canons, that they publicly protested, if they knew the person or persons that had committed that act, they not only would lose their places and be expelled [from] the university, but also have their ears cut off in the market place. The Presbyterians were wonderfully pleased at this action, laughed heartily among themselves, and some in my hearing protested that if they knew the person that did this heroic deed, they would convey to him an encouraging gratuity."

Our people, in this diary entry, were the ones with stirring sticks and gratuities. **Our** people were the ones seeing extravagant frills and saying "you shouldn't do that".

Traces of the puritan heart awaited me in the first two parishes in which I served. The communion table at Blockhouse Bay (parish number one) had tiny little blocks of wood propping up each corner - maybe one centimetre from the floor. The blocks made it clear that this was a **table (with table legs)**, and **not** a flat-bottomed altar. The people of Takapuna (number two) agreed to allow different coloured pulpit falls for different seasons, but only on the condition that the order of service for the first Sunday of each season carried an article explaining the meaning of each colour. If adornment sought to enter the room, it first had to be stripped of any mystery - explained until it made sense but was boring.

The woman breaks her jar of ointment open, and pours it on the head of Jesus. "She ought not to have done that" says the puritan heart and everyone in the room. It was a foolish extravagance! - until Jesus called it "beautiful" - something to be remembered, honoured, and cherished.

During the long season of winter, the trees stripped back their clothing - became as stark and small as possible. The skies took on a shade of grey. Anything living kind of went to ground, to save its energy. Call winter the "puritan of the seasons", why don't we? - maybe something that seems natural to those who look with sideways glance at anything bright. Winter is a sensible season of restraint. No frills. No distractions. Subduing of life . . .

Now morning gilds the skies; our hearts, awaking cry "May Jesus Christ be praised!" Now there's a silly amount of colour. Now the birds are singing boldly. Now the grass is growing, and the lawn mower goes click, click, click. Daffodils, posies, people knocking on doors saying "Springtime greetings". It's like the extravagance of God has broken open the bottle, and out the perfume pours - while the puritan heart is saying "are you sure you should be doing that?"

Creation, of course, doesn't stop to answer. To do its beautiful thing, with flowers in hand, it's taken off after its "new life" God.

*Some never think of it.
You did. You'd come along
and say you'd nearly brought me flowers
but something had gone wrong.
The shop was closed. Or you had doubts -
the sort that minds like ours
dream up incessantly. You thought
I might not want your flowers.*

*It made me smile and hug you then.
Now I can only smile.
But, look, the flowers you nearly brought
have lasted all this while.*

The Second Lesson: 2 Corinthians 3: 1-3

Reflection: Flowers delivered

She stands at the door, prepares to knock. She has a wee posey of flowers and a card printed in the office at Knox. The card says "Springtime greetings from Knox Church", but what's she going to say when the door gets opened? "Kia ora, I'm Mary, and these flowers are from Knox"? Or maybe this isn't a "kia ora" house. Maybe "hello" is less of a risk. What then? Is there a script to follow? Does she go in? If invited, does she accept, even though she's shy, and really would prefer to deliver her blessing and step away? Kind of hard to plan when you don't know how things are for the person behind the door (a puritan heart almost melting, a lonely heart wanting to sing). Maybe that's why it's good to have a card. When we don't know what to say, the card can say it for us. But no, it feels like something more active is required - something with sound and reciprocity, movement and loveliness of life . . . Has this just become more complicated than it should be? She shouldn't do ***that!***

The flowers are lovely, and who doesn't love getting flowers? *Some never think of it. You did. You'd come along and say you'd nearly brought me flowers* - of course we all want flowers! A silly amount of colour, a singing of the birds, a growing of the grass, and click, click, click. Daffodils, posies, the extravagant God's gone mad. Morning gilds the skies, the heart, awaking cries . . . we all want flowers.

Paul's not going to be knocking on any door in Corinth any time soon. He's been delayed in a range of ways. Sometimes it's just too difficult to go simply from here to there as if all is going by plan. So he's written a letter to the Corinthians, apologizing for not being there. They, without him, are going to have to do the work of Jesus. He tells them not to worry though - and not to feel like they need a letter of introduction to the world (explaining who they are how they love). He tells them instead, that they themselves are living letters, written by Christ. If they proceed not with black and white letters, but with human hearts, anyone who sees them will feel like they've been visited by the Spirit of the living God. Who's that one bringing flowers? - bringing colour and the celebration of new life in the name of the Springtime Jesus? How did this act of delivering a flower become a living letter from the God of life? The winter-bound puritan heart says "are you sure you should be doing that". And Paul says "are we beginning to commend ourselves again?" . . .

God blesses the garden. The garden puts forth its colour and life. The people sing their hymns. The flowers find their way to the doors on which we knock. Beyond the door, the heart awaking cries . . .

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You did. You'd come along
and said you'd nearly brought me flowers
but something had gone wrong.
The shop was closed. Or you had doubts -
the sort that minds like ours
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