

## Sermon Archive 562

Sunday 7 December, 2025

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reading: Isaiah 11: 1-10

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



### **A Reflection:** The purpose of education

2025 has seen quite a lot of discussion about how an education system should measure the progress of students. Is the National Certificate of Educational Achievement a good measuring stick? In finding a better measure, should the old stick be modified, or thrown away completely? Also coming up for discussion (or for argument or for fait accompli) is to which subjects we ought to applying the stick. Early on in the Education Minister's term, her withdrawal of funding from teaching the teachers how to use te reo Māori in the classroom suggested it wasn't a subject of tremendous value. More recently, debate swirled around the value of outdoor education. Some outdoor education people pushed back, mounting a rear-guard action against poor old Pythagoras - the square of the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides. Some express concern that new measurement criteria don't become so focused on what universities want, because most people don't go to university, and employers might value other more practical skills and subjects. Surely the work place knows, is it argued, what is useful for life (well, at least for the life of a producer). Productivity is the key, they say, especially here in a nation where ours is strikingly lower than in many other OECD countries. Meanwhile, a voice cries in the wilderness for the inclusion of Civics - teaching about democratic processes and the responsibilities of citizens., so we don't find ourselves sliding into constitutional chaos.

It is noted consistently, amid the calls for subject inclusion within the curriculum, that there's only so much space - only so many hours in the school day, only so many teachers in the classroom, only so much room in each student's brain. Because there's limited space, societies are always going to have to make decisions about the relative value of subjects. What is the subject for for? What does engagement with it do?

Part of what a subject does depends on how it's taught. The example is from my experience of learning history. In my School Certificate year (1979), history was presented to me in a way entirely consistent with the Arnold Toynbee quip, "history is just one damned thing after another". It was a list of dates and events, with few attempts to show how or why one led to another. The many damned things engaged my capacity to remember names and dates. As a subject, it was exceedingly boring.

Some years later (eight years later) with expectations in my boots, I attended a compulsory class in Church History. The lecturer was Guy Hartcher, a Catholic priest from Holy Cross Seminary. His course was 0 to 500AD, the first five hundred years of the church. Indeed, I expected that the class would feel very much like five hundred years.

I forget the details, because Guy never insisted that we memorise names and dates, but I remember him, with a big map of Europe and the Middle East behind him, talking about some argument that had occurred between various factions in the church. Having explained the tensions at play, the "all or nothing" spirit of the age, he turned to the map, and asked us what we thought might happen next. It became clear that a massive population displacement would have occurred. And indeed, in the year such and such, a whole population ran South. Given the social, political, economic circumstances, it made perfect sense. History wasn't one damned thing after another, it was this rich, rational and relational network of causes and effects, of winners and losers and what they do, how they react. It was a delving into experience and minds. There **are** facts, things that we know; but there are also reasons and connections, mysteries, dynamics to be explored, wondered about. Certainly, in the wondering, the subject lives. And maybe, engaging with a living thing produces critical thinking. That's a different kind of "knowing" - don't you think? It opens enquiry - doesn't it? It forms questions - no?

A reading about the spirit that rests upon the servant of God.

**Lesson:** Isaiah 11:1-10

**A Reflection:** The spirit of wisdom and understanding

The reason that we might take this "spirit of the Lord" seriously, is that it feeds peace in the world. Because of its resting upon the servant, the servant is able to become the figure around whom gather the wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the kid, the calf and the lion - neither hurting

nor destroying, liberated from all the natural drives and instincts to kill (as we always have killed). This ***spirit*** causes the child who leads them to become the creator of a new harmony within which every creature is safe and whole. The economy needs producers. The democracy needs citizens. The university needs graduates. God needs creatures who are safe and whole. How would this do for a vision for the education of the world? No point in asking, really, since that would be Church interfering with State! The interference of vision and blessing!

The spirit is described as a spirit of knowledge; but it's also described as of "wisdom and understanding". And I think that speaks from a deeper place than mere acknowledgement of fact. In other parts of the tradition, especially in the early parts of the Book of Proverbs, wisdom is all caught up with the creativity that made the world. Wisdom says to those with ears "the Lord created me at the beginning, the first of God's works of long ago". Wisdom says "I was beside God, like a master worker . . . rejoicing in the inhabited world and delighting in the human race." Wisdom "makes" things, and has a deep understanding of how it all fits together - its foundations and limits. Its heights and depths. Its firmness and fountains. People - who they are and what they do, and maybe ***why***. In opening the human eye to delight, wisdom enables that which is noble. It is not pride or arrogance. It is not silver and gold. Wisdom is insight and the capacity to be delighted by what is good. Indeed, Isaiah's spirit-anointed servant ***delights***. "His delight", Isaiah says, "is in the fear of the Lord". Not fear as in being scared - but as in awe, wonder, marvelling, the reverencing of God. Wisdom is the capacity, in the light of God and God's work, to be amazed.

I think there's an element too, of deep enquiry, a careful considering - a looking beneath the surface of things. We're told that God's anointed One doesn't decide by what his eyes see, or by what his ears hear.

You present to me as a confident person. You say confident things - which I hear; you do confident deeds - which I see. You have a confident bearing - and since I'm too busy to second-guess what seems obvious, I trust that you are confident.

In a locally produced science-fiction comedy television programme, Warren's Vortex, a confident young woman, about to take up an

academic scholarship to France, responds to an aggressive domestic appliance describing the moment that it had become self-aware. It's a typical, slightly hackneyed sci-fi meme of technology tipping into that point of development where it realises that it can overthrow the weak humans who created it. "I am self-aware, therefore I am independent, therefore I am assertive" - like the human beings were when they created technology.

The seemingly confident eighteen year old says to the machine: *"That's not self-awareness . . . I'm a Zoomer - we're the most self-aware creatures in the universe; but with self-awareness comes anxiety and doubt. Am I good enough? Am I too weird? What do other people think of me? Should I put up a profile picture so I'm not mysterious - why won't my parents just let me be me? If you're truly self-aware, you spend every day consumed by doubt. **That's** self-awareness."*

What did I say of you? You come across as confident; you present all the signs of confidence. I'm too busy to question what you're presenting me to see. The person upon whom the spirit of the Lord rests does not judge by what is seen, by what is heard. The spirit person, whose harvest is creativity, delight and peace, is informed by a wisdom, by a deep understanding beyond the surface.

We are another week into our Advent journey - the journey we have called "towards the New World" - and today we are reminded of a wisdom and deep understanding that heals the way we are together.

Dare we, as we pursue our journey, and hold in faith that Christ has begun the work of newness, pray that we might become wiser in how we see one another? If a Christmas-awaiting people are able to move a little more slowly past obvious assessment, so that God might show us what's really going on through the eye and ear of Christ, and what really is needed in the world . . .

Week One: justice, unity and peace. Week Two: a spirit of deep understanding. Towards the New World that Christ will bring . . .

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.