

Sermon Archive 563

Sunday 14 December, 2025

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reading: Isaiah 35: 1-7

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Reflection: Creatures of a dry and desert land

There is a landscape, waiting to be formed into what is a natural context for the creatures who inhabit it. It will be a reflection of how the creatures are. Will they match a lush garden, or a high mountain, or an open field under which many treasures are buried, or a dessert? We'd better meet the creatures.

-ooOoo-

I have a weak hand, O God. In my youth, my teachers gave hours to training it to form letters, so that I could record facts and write stories. In strength, it might have written stories of hope and love and wonder. In weakness, it writes gossip and matters that are mean.

I have a weak hand, O God. In my youth, my parents spent lots of money and encouragement, training it to glide around the piano, whipping up miracles of sound. Ways to entertain, faithfully to recreate the imaginings of the composer - in improvisation, to express myself in ways that writing couldn't. Yet my work is mechanical, unmusical.

I have a weak hand, O God. No one taught me this part. It's how to extend the hand to the other. Has he fallen off his bike? Has she found herself at a point where a touch on her shoulder might bolster her resolve? Has he got to the point where he needs to know that he is special? I withhold my hand.

I have a weak hand, O God. All it needs to do is form with its counterpart a place into which a piece of bread might be placed. Hands for the soul! But grace is foreign to me, for like I say: I have a weak hand.

-ooOoo-

I have a feeble knee, O God. What's the knee for? For bending in prayer? With this knee as it is, I can't quite get down there - to wherever from where I feel my prayers ought to be formed. The supple knee might bend in this practice of prayer in a way that shows that I am asking, you might be giving, our wills might seek alignment . . . I have a feeble knee.

I have a feeble knee. The knee is critical in how I stand. "Here I stand" said the proud people, whose hearts were captured by gospel, justice, truth and pride. HERE WE STAND. When days are difficult, and energy departs; when ranks of the powerful stand shoulder to shoulder against what I think Christ has invited me to believe; when others say "bow to us", we need to stand. But, like I said, I have a feeble knee.

-ooOoo-

I have a fearful heart, O God. For the moment, bravely it pumps the blood - but we all know that's not what we mean. "Heart" is courage. "Heart" is who we are. "Heart" is our being alive. How did **that** become fearful? I don't know, my Lord. In the absence of heart, what do we have? Cowardice? Lack of principle? Echoing emptiness? So far as we help our God, no new world at all.

-ooOoo-

I am blind, O God. No, don't you be throwing your sympathy on me. I'm brave and feisty. I'm using my other senses to compensate - and I've got to say those other heightened things (like pride and drive and anger). Of course I would love not to have had to have made my pivoting, displayed my agility, done any of the other things we represent in our clichés. I'd love just to be able to see - colour, shape, light, shade, the real faces of those whose voices are familiar to me. And I'd love to see as the seers and prophets and visionaries saw. But as I say, I am blind.

-ooOoo-

I am deaf, O God. The frustration of not being part of the conversation - missing the important things that someone said, because of the clatter of knives and forks. Missing a crucial opportunity to understand someone else's situation, because the truck drove by. Much more, the deaf who require a whole other language in sign. And noticing that most of the nation doesn't bother learning its second official language, because communicating with the deaf doesn't matter. Who really wants to speak with me?

-ooOoo-

I am lame, O God. Where most people easily go, I cannot go. There's a step. There's a narrow door. There's a fear of falling. There's a huge requirement on me in terms of energy (heavy legs), just to get to catch up with where the agile ones already are. The ADHD person understands entirely the confession "how complicated she finds doing things that others consider to be simple." Most people take for granted the "going from here to there". But we, we find ourselves exposed before the loving eye of God, and say "O God, I am lame".

-ooOoo-

According to Isaiah, those are God's creatures. Shall we indeed, as promised, form a landscape that reflects them?

One imagines the landscape is dry, something of a desert. We could dot a few jackals around it - skinny jackals because there's not much there for them to eat. Vicious jackals, because if there *is* anything living to be consumed, it's going to be in the line of sight of many. Songs may once have been sung on this landscape, but aren't anymore. Poems once might have been composed, but now they're not. This is a place where life has become dust. The hand is weak. The knee is feeble. The heart is fearful. The eye is blind. The ear is deaf. The person is lame. For these creatures of God, the proper match is a dry and empty landscape.

-ooOoo-

The Advent people of Ōtautahi wait for the coming of the new world. We hear the Word of God:

*Waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert.*

*The burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water.*

*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad;
the desert shall rejoice and blossom, like the crocus.*

On the edge of Christmas, we have been looking to the coming of the new world. Isaiah gives a vision of a dry landscape coming to life. Renewal. Flourishing. A bursting into life!

The Gospel Lesson: Matthew 11:2-6

Music for Reflection

Reflection: Tell John about what we see

John the Baptist thought he'd worked out where the new world was going to come from. For a while he'd thought it would emerge from people repenting. Repentance: the honest evaluation of one's life, the non-defensive acceptance of responsibility for what one has done, the sincere hope to align one's life more closely with what was expressed by the prophets. That's what took John down to the Jordan, to baptise the people. "Be baptised" he'd said, "repent, and bear fruit worthy of repentance". In John's mind, the new world was going to come from people "turning themselves around and bearing good fruit".

We're not told what it was that convinced him that Jesus, not his own work, was going to be critical in activating all that in the people. We're told only that as soon as Jesus appeared, John stopped his baptising, and told everyone to follow Jesus. "My work now must decrease; his must increase. If you seek the new world, then you need to follow Jesus." That's what he'd said.

A little while later, and now he's not so sure. Is that because he's now in jail, and jail's a great place to suffer doubts? Is there something about bars on the window, rats in the corner, death on the door, that make you wonder whether you mightn't have made a huge mistake? Maybe it is hard to see newness when there's no natural light. Hard to hope, when there's no encouragement. So via the network, he sends a question to the One of whom he'd once been certain: "**are** you the One, or are we to wait for someone else?"

Jesus sends the messengers back to John, asking them simply to describe for him what they are seeing in the world: the blind receiving sight, the lame walking, the lepers cleansed, the dead rising, the little people receiving encouragement. All these old signs of God coming close are happening. The new world is beginning. Real people are coming to life.

We are on this Advent journey, a Christmas-horizon search for the new world. Week One - the inkling that somehow we'll find it when we find justice, peace, reconciliation coming down from that mountain. Week Two - the feeling that maybe we'll get there when we understand one another more deeply. And this week, the suggestion that it's already on its way - when we are able to see healing, the strengthening of the weak, people overcoming, the little ones coming to life.

Were we a people of home-work, maybe this week we might set ourselves the goal of scanning our world for even one person who is healing, one person who is becoming stronger, one person who is standing tall, one person who is moving from little to joyful. If we were to find one such person, or be one such person, then the new world might be felt to be pressing in.

As an Advent person, looking to nurture hope, are you up for that? Looking for the flourishing of life?

We keep a moment of quiet.

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