

Sermon Archive 568

Sunday 18 January, 2026

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Stevie Wonder Reflections 1/3

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



On 21 July last year, as part of the BBC's *Sidetracked* podcast series, Annie Macmanus conducted an interview with Stevie Wonder, musician. As he answered questions in his idiosyncratic way, it became clear that Stevie's work is informed by religious faith. As I heard the interview in early 2026, I began framing three services around things that Stevie had said. I transcribed the relevant parts of the interview, and paste the transcripts at the start of the each sermon. The style is messy, since it's a direct record of the casual language from the interview. I haven't "tidied it up" much.

Annie

Was there a moment in your childhood when you when you realised that you had a gift that was unique, to, say, your brothers and sisters? I'm not saying better, but just unique to you.

Stevie

I never thought of it being me being unique or better or whatever. I just thought it was a blessing that I was given. And I thank God for that blessing. Obviously I knew, you know, I could sing. I love singing. And so my goal was always to do better and better at it. . . . Once when I first came to Motown, I met Smokey Robinson. And I remember I said, you know, "you can sing good, but I can sing better".

Annie

You did [as a] little 11 year old Stevie? How did Smokey take that?

Stevie

He probably laughed, like ha ha.

Annie

Why Stevie Wonder were we created with the ability to sing?

Stevie

I think that there was a calling for that to be given to us. And it was all about how much we're going to use it for the goodness of what we've been given. It's a gift. It's an honour.. And so my thing always is I say "thank you God" every day for just me being able to sing - to come up with a lyric, come up with a melody, chords, all

of it. And you know, I believe in the greatness, the goodness of the Creator. And I've never been with the dilemma of seeing God as a man or woman - I don't even relate to that. And God is a spirit. And so I never got hung up and all that stuff that people do.

Annie

*I interviewed Yebba once at an amazing singer I don't know if you've heard of Yebba, but she grew up in the church and she talked about the fact that every time she sings, God is in the room. Well her voice speaks on that. You can hear it, you can feel it. And I feel the same for your music, and I wonder how that . . . But that concept, I suppose of music coming through you from a divine sense. In an interview with Oprah 20 years ago (I don't know if you remember), but I read it today and you talked about music as having always been a lesson to you, that it comes from God through you. And I wondered, that sense of making music and then coming back and hearing it, and it teaching **you**, even though you made it. Are you still having that?*

Stevie

I mean, if you believe, you know that the Spirit gives it to you, then obviously there's more for you to get if you find yourself worthy by how and what you do. I always tell people I'm 3 times 25, so I'm still young. I'm still a baby to this thing called "life". And I was feeling like there's so much more that I want to do, and I know that God wants me to do. So, in this time and space that we do have, I want to do everything I can.

The First Lesson: Matthew 10: 17-20

Reflection: It is not you who speak

In 1961, the eleven year old Steveland Morris is introduced to Smokey Robinson. Smokey is 21 years old, has already produced a million selling single, and is just into his ten year run during which he would release 26 top forty hits. He's doing what, in the industry, they call "quite well". The eleven year old says to him "you can sing good, but I can sing better".

Sixty four years later, when quizzed about talent, creative power, Stevie tells this story against his younger, more arrogant self. He then goes on to speak about being gifted - with a strong emphasis on how gifting, within the Christian understanding of it, is more of a privilege than an achievement. He thanks God for the songs he's been able to write. He thinks that human beings were given singing voices so they could express the goodness of the Creator. There may indeed be some "perspiration" involved in the creative process - but it's unwise to forget the "inspiration". Keep your feet on the ground, your heart tuned to gratitude, and your ear to the Creator.

In another story about inspiration and creativity, set several centuries earlier, we find the Italian composer, Antonio Salieri, giving thanks to God for the compositions he's been able to write. He enjoys the appreciation of his audiences and benefactors, until they become distracted by a new composer on the block. The new composer, a much younger Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, produces work that is considered much more worthy than Salieri's. What upsets Salieri is not just his own loss of status on the billboard, but his judgment that Mozart is young, vulgar, arrogant, not possessed of any piety. He never says "thank you God" when completing a work. And yet the public considers his work "inspired". Why would God give gifts to someone who doesn't acknowledge God's goodness? The rest of the story is about what that question does to an increasingly angry and bitter old man. He thanks God for inspiring him, but blames God for inspiring someone else. It's like he's still thinking of his achievement as his alone - as if God is required to produce the goods.

Jesus is speaking to his disciples, who've become anxious about whether they will be persecuted, and what they will need to say when that happens. Jesus speaks to them of the "Spirit of the Father" - assuring that this Spirit will give words that are perfect for the moment. "It is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you".

In the world of the God who inspires, and gives words, and thoughts, and notes, and rhymes, and truth - there is no need for fear. There is no need for arrogance. There is no room for jealousy. When things are *given*, there's no room for narcissism. Maybe also though, there *is* room for us to rejoice that we're given the capacity to create - food on the table, a poem, a garden, a piece of knitting, a letter, a prayer, sounds from the piano - given expressions of the goodness of the Creator. None of this is trivial, either, when God is "in the room" . . . Balancing satisfaction in what we are enabled to do, with joy over what others are enabled to do, while always keeping aside any sense of arrogance. Walking the tightrope between satisfaction and arrogance, between receiving and giving away - along the question "why were we created with the ability to sing?"

I always tell people I'm 3 times 25, so I'm still young. I'm still a baby to this thing called "life". And I was feeling there's so much more that I want to do, and I know that God wants me to do. So, in this time and space that we do have, I want to do everything I can.

Music for Reflection

The Second Lesson: John 4: 17-26

Reflection: God is spirit

From his reading of the goodness of the Creator, Stevie says that God is neither man nor woman, but spirit. Where, other than from his own experience of being inspired in his art, might that have come from?

Jesus is in conversation with a woman from Samaria. So it's a clash of cultures and ideas about where God might be found. She says to him that her people found God on one particular mountain, while ***his*** found God on another. They note that within their cultures he, a man, ought not to be talking to her, a woman. They note that while they both need to draw water from the well, they can't really do it together - so great are the divisions between them. He is a man, she is a woman. He is a Jew, she is a Samaritan. Any aspirations they might share will remain hidden, or defeated, because of what their cultures say.

Jesus then speaks about a time that is coming, when it no longer will be about this mountain, or that mountain. No longer will it be about religious traditions that have ossified around gender distinctions, cultural distinctions, political territory, old divisions (how can I, a Samaritan, share a bucket with you, a Jew). No; now a ***new*** understanding is coming.

The new understanding hadn't come yet for Jesus and the woman. Jesus frames it in terms of "the hour is coming". We might ask now, two thousand years later, whether the time has come yet? Maybe in some ways it has. Maybe in some way it hasn't. But Jesus locates the coming of the time within the Jewish man and the Samaritan woman leaving behind "God is on this mountain", "no, God is on that mountain", with an understanding of God as "spirit". God seeks, he says, those who can worship God ***in*** spirit and in truth.

What will we welcome as God's Spirit is perceived? What wonderful goodness of the Creator might be perceived, composed, sung in the space of our shared life, as the harsh old divisions of culture are supplanted - supplanted by the new God of Spirit?

What happens when God is in the room?

We keep a moment of quiet.