

## Sermon Archive 574

Sunday 1 March, 2026

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reflections for Lent 2

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



They say to him, "if we had been alive when our ancestors were, we would not have joined with them in doing the evil that history clearly pins to them. We would have done better with the matters of those days than they did."

Jesus hears this. Then he says, "so you admit that you belong to a tradition that carries shame, that threads a long rusty line of error. You admit that your family has blood on its hands. And your response to the wrong is not to say "sorry". It's not to confess your own capacity for error. It's instead to say "we would have done better". They were bad, but we are good. They might have been full of dead people's bones, but we are clean and pretty. Look how pretty we are - while we, just like our predecessors, engage in killing this latest "prophet from God". Dead men's bones.

Jesus is quite clearly angry with them. How much of the anger, though, is about what they're doing (killing the prophets)? And how much is about hiding from what they're doing - pretending to be doing something else? As Jesus rails at them, casting woes towards them, the exclamation mark comes after the word "hypocrites". The culmination of his anger is at the hypocrisy. If you're going to do evil, then at least be honest about it. Don't pretend that evil is good. As Martin Luther said, "if you're going to sin (as you will), sin boldly".

-ooOoo-

*Hello, is that Mrs Smith? Nice to talk to talk to you today. I'm Derek, ringing from Spark Telecommunications. Look, we've seen in our system that your data is running much slower than it should be. So I've been asked to contact you and help sort this out.*

*Data? Yes; data is all the stuff that flows through your computer from your internet connection . . . That's right. Have you noticed your computer going slowly sometimes?*

*Ah Mrs Smith, you're clearly a very patient person. But no, believe me, if we can sort this problem out, then your computer will go even more quickly. I know it's a bit confusing, but I'm here to help you; but we do need to sort this out now.*

*OK, Mrs Smith, can you confirm your email address. Thank you; that matches our records. Now, so I can remotely fix your settings, I'll need to get in, so to do that I'll need your password. No, there's no charge. Spark are paying me. No, you don't need to talk to your son about this. I'm here to help you. See how pretty I am.*

The bastard takes not just her money, but her confidence. She doesn't feel she can tell her family that he said he was here to help. Pretending to be who we're not. Claiming to be good, when we're being bad - abusing the trust of the vulnerable. This is a whitewashed tomb stone placed in the way of Jesus.

-ooOoo-

After the 1994 election in South Africa, the Most Reverend Archbishop of Cape Town, Desmond Tutu, was appointed by President Nelson Mandela to chair the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. At a Nobel Peace Laureates' function in Virginia in 1998, Tutu explained the rationale of the Commission. He noted that some countries dealt with "moving on from past conflicts" by setting up mechanisms for revenge (as in Rwanda). Nurenberg was another process, with victors imposing justice, and with the judges leaving at the end of the process, never having to share the same geographic space with those who lost. The third option is doing nothing, where bygones are bygones - let's forget what has happened, getting on with living in the present. Tutu said that bygones don't just become bygones - they return to haunt you. The experimental South African way, said Tutu, was the telling of truth, and the extending of amnesty. In exchange for truth, you get amnesty.

In another interview the same year, with Journeyman Television, an interviewer said to Tutu, "You found out so much truth. Isn't it going to be a heavy burden for the future?"

Tutu replies: The burden would be if you pretended that it wasn't there. Now it has come out into the open, it will not fester. The trouble with many countries - look at the United States - they have not dealt with the legacy of slavery. They have not dealt with the legacy of the Civil War. And so

constantly they get eruptions of race incidents, which in part can be attributed to the to this past with which they have not really dealt.

Interviewer: Some people said all this truth worsened the situation.

Tutu: You know when a husband and wife have quarrelled, because one of them is unfaithful, the truth, when it comes out, can almost alienate them. It can even lead to divorce. But it could also be something that strengthens their relationship if they handle it. But initially the truth shocks. The truth traumatises and it's not easy. It's never easy to forgive. It's never easy to be reconciled. It's not cheap.

In footage from the Commission, a black South African woman says "I would love to know who killed my father; so would my brothers, I suppose. Because it's very hard for us right now to do anything. We do want to forgive, but we don't know who to forgive, because we don't know the killer.

She makes the point that it's hard to reconcile, when we don't have truth. And Jesus laments that the Scribes and Pharisees are hiding their true selves from those whom they purport to be helping. They say they are one thing, while clearly are actually something else. Seeing this gap where the all-important honesty about self should be, he despairs that hypocrisy is a tomb stone placed in reconciliation's way.

Post script to this: since Tutu's death, some reflection has continued on the effectiveness of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Critics from black perspective agree with critics from white perspective, that the Commission was less effective than it could have been, because a number of people appearing there just told lies. They were not honest about what happened. They were not honest about who they were. It seems that whitewashing went on. Did Jesus weep?

-ooOoo-

"Post truth" is not a new term. It gained prominence during the first term of a particular administration across the sea. In some ways the first administration **was** actually still engaged in truth. It said "if I shot someone in Fifth Avenue, no one would care". It said "I grab them by the pussy - because I can". There was no great dissembling of the vulgar truth.

But in a second term there are prayer breakfasts. There are "I have done more for God than any other president". There is the Trump Bible. There

is "don't believe your eyes; *that* dead man was armed and coming as a terrorist". There is absolute lying about what people have clearly seen with their own eyes. There is no room for truth in the narrative being told. I am here to help you. See how pretty I am.

And Jesus laments the presence of a whitewashed thing that is full of death.

-ooOoo-

There we are. This sermon was always going to be a bit like this, because it's a response to Jesus getting angry about hypocrisy and disdain for the truth. We kind of had to go where we went.

But now, on our journey through Lent, what are we called to do instead?

Sunday by Sunday, in church, we give time near the beginning of our service to praying a prayer of confession. In our prayers we never say that we are better than our ancestors. We never say "we are incapable of wrong". Rather we say "Lord have mercy". This is a ritualised practice of seeking clarity about how we have fallen short - always including, though, a declaration that we are free now to live as we ought, and can. Perhaps a disciplined desire to be honest before the compassion of the One who heals, is something that Jesus would have us cultivate through Lent.

Maybe also to be cultivated within the Lenten church is the celebrating of honesty in the stories our culture tells - the rewarding of honesty not with judgment, but with encouragement. The singing of praise about the good things that mark the world's life. The "yes" to other's self-awareness. The "thank you" to those who have the courage to acknowledge what is true. The embrace of those who put fear aside, come out of the whitewash, and say "yes, this is who I am".

Jesus laments the hypocrisy - we maybe feel the call to nurture the honesty.

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.