

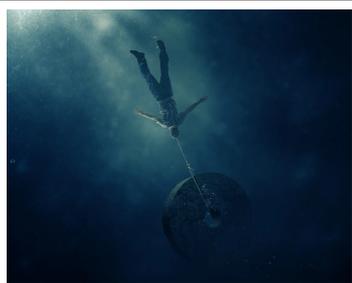
Sermon Archive 576

Sunday 15 March, 2026

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reflections for Lent 4

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



A larger version of the picture is in the order of service.

A Lesson: Matthew 18: 6-7

You have grain that needs to be turned into flour. You have olives that need turning into oil. And so you invent the millstone. Heavy - it has to be heavy to provide the friction to do the crushing. Round - it has to be round to revolve on the base - drawn in its rotation probably by a donkey you've trained to walk in circles. Round is useful, too, if you need to move the stone from here to there - you can roll it on its circular side. It's the only way to move something that heavy. Have you heard the expression "dead weight"? It's an expression most often used to describe bodies - the dead weight of a body. The body's not helping, just hindering - giving nothing to any attempted momentum - just dead weight.

-ooOoo-

I recall an occasion from long ago. Cyril and I became aware of someone who'd fallen on the lawn one frosty Dunedin night. It turns out that the fallen one had been trying to relieve his bladder of some of its alcohol supplemented urine, when he'd lost balance, ended up on the frost, and decided not to bother getting up. When we found him, we did the responsible thing - decided to help him inside where he wouldn't die of hypothermia. It was a good plan, resisted by the fallen one's remaining shreds of consciousness being devoted to hating himself and deciding the he deserved to die in the frost. "I don't deserve any help" he said. Helping him to walk up the stairs to his room, became carrying him up the stairs to his room. He was capable of contributing to the locomotion, but had decided to be a "dead weight". Because Cyril was a giant, and because I was smaller but determined, "rescue" won that engagement - but had to contend with "dead weight".

The photo has a millstone tied around the neck of a human being. The bubbles rising from his left foot suggest the descent through the water is rapid. Does the posture of his arms suggest a lack of struggle (resistance is futile)? Light shines from the surface; the darkness already obscures the bottom part of the stone. The weight of the stone is doing what it does. Dead weight does what *it* does. Weight drags down, and this human being is sinking.

-ooOoo-

Jesus talks about how important it is not to present the "little ones" with stumbling blocks. Who are the little ones? They are described more fully as "little ones who believe in me" - so they are little believers - infants in the faith. They're those who've become captivated by Christ - what he does, whom he gathers, who he seems to be - and have taken their first few steps into responding to his call "come and see". They walk sometimes with excitement, sometimes with fear. They have few resources of the type "how did we negotiate this last time", for there is no last time, this is the first time. They walk with a kind of tenderness, genuine untested hope. They have wide eyes, and are the beginning of tomorrow. They're hoping to be able to live with hope - hoping for buoyant hope. They have no dead weight. But let's put a big stone in front of them! Let's watch them stop. Let's watch them strain against it. Let's watch them fall. Why? Why would you do that?

Yet Jesus witnesses the religious authorities doing it all the time. He'll say "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses's seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practise what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others, but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to [help]." A ministry of dead weight.

Within that ministry, the millstone voice rings out in different ways. "Did God really tell you not to eat of anything in the garden?" "Worship me, and I will give you the world". "Think what you could do with thirty pieces of silver". "There is no God". "Jesus died".

Look, the little ones were always going to stumble, to sin. They were always going to find their way into trouble, for such is the way of the human being. One day will come for each of them the first experience of disappointing the self, the handling the guilt, the realising the limit. Jesus the realist knows that this is so. But woe, woe to those who rejoice in it, who work to make it happen, who lay upon the little ones the lashings of dead, dead weight. For them, Jesus shares the image (not of the little ones, but of the stumbling block people) of the millstone around the neck.

Because we are exploring the stones that were put in the way of Jesus, Lent was always going to present us with images that disturb. This is just such a one. To those who cause the little ones to stumble, Jesus gives the millstone.

Music for Reflection

A Second Lesson: Matthew 14: 22-33

Peter is sinking like a stone. He's hardly one of the little ones - but he's done something in keeping with the naive (haven't failed yet because I hadn't tried this before) pursuit of walking on the water. Maybe he's had not a senior moment, but a "little ones" moment - a flash of hope!

The narrator suggests that his failure to stay buoyant on the sea is something to do with his noticing the strong wind and becoming frightened. When we're frightened, it's harder to stay afloat.

He is rescued from sinking as Jesus stretches out his hand and catches him. Is it with a serious censorious brow, or maybe with a gentle smile that Jesus says to him "you of little faith, why did you doubt?" We have no clues with the frown or the smile, but I like to think of the smile. It feels more like Jesus taking care of one of the little ones. "Silly ning-nong, walking on the water like that! Come on - into my arms!"

The Pharisees' dead weight of the millstone. Jesus's lifting up from sinking in the fear. Herein maybe lies the call to Christ's Lenten people.

If Christ were forming a people to do his will and work, that people would have an eye to survey the world, and pick out from the busyness and noise, the wee signs of faith flickering in the corners. Pick out the signs of hope, hoping that hope is going to work. The naivety, the tenderness, the soft - the things of the "little ones". The Christ people would not miss seeing these things - but would notice them.

And having noticed, they wouldn't see what they see as an opportunity to pounce or seize, or steal or crush, or curse or ruin - but an opportunity to guard against the fears that are bound to come. How do you guard against the fears? Well, you stand with people as they face them. You help work out whether this is one of those fears that is based on something real, that requires calibration of our being careful. Or whether it's based on lies (phantasms and fantasies) that don't really exist. Whether the fears are ghosts in the garden or knives in the kitchen, the key to lifting up the fearful is to be with them as they face the fear. Like Jesus on the water, like "save me" being met by "take my hand", the sinking stops when Jesus is with Peter in the storm.

The opposite of the dead weight of the millstone, is Jesus lifting up Peter as he experiences the fear.

-ooOoo-

Jesus, I was fearful. In 1986 I looked in the mirror and didn't like what I saw. I was fearful that there was nothing loveable in me. In a psalm, you spoke to me of my being fearfully and wonderfully made - and the poetry was nice. Then you sent me a fellow minister in training for a cup of milo. The next day he sent me a hand-written note: "I always enjoy spending time with you. I like your humour, personality and taste in music, and I think your congregations will be very fond of you. Keep well. Martin." Some of the fear went away.

Jesus, I was fearful. I feared that a melanoma in my early thirties, and the elevated probabilities of other cancers that came with it, meant that my life would be shorter, rather than longer. You sent me one of your sayings "don't worry about tomorrow - today's trouble is enough for today". And then you sent me a doctor who said "that melanoma has gone. You have no melanoma. Pick up your bed and walk, young man." And some of the fear went away.

Jesus, I was fearful. I feared that I might be gay. Then I feared that I might not be brave enough to live my truth. You sent me story of Peter's vision of the unclean picnic - and left ringing in my ears and spirit "do not call unclean what I declare clean". And you sent me a minister called David Clark, who lived with pride, delight, and real Christian integrity. A door opened, and some of the fear went away.

Jesus, I was fearful. I feared the world was driven by selfishness, such that no one would forgive, no one would love, and the little ones would always be crushed. You gave me story after story of generosity flowing from God's heart - multitudes fed on a morsel, a father hugging the prodigal, the sick healed, the Christians sharing everything they had - and then you gave me (in real time) a huge great cloud of witnesses who worship, and praise, and share what they have, and never count the cost - endless ordinary people I have known, who have worn your name and said to me "our God is good". And yes, through their being brave with me, some of the fear went away.

-ooOoo-

This is the fourth Sunday in Lent. The stone today is the dead weight of the millstone that drags us down into drowning. Today also, we Lenten people are called to consider being with others, such that we can rise above the waters of fear . . . Chipping away at the stone . . . 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.