

## Sermon Archive 539

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Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reflections on Majendie artworks

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



**Reflection:** The dove and the cage.

The Spirit bird, who is wild and free, descends upon this figure emerging from his waters of baptism. Any creature wild and free might make a glancing touch, then fly away again - off there, or there, or somewhere . . . That's entirely in the nature of "wild and free". But no, so the story goes, the Spirit bird alights on this One, and stays. Is staying consistent with wild and free? I suppose it all depends.

The people of the One who was baptised maintain that the "wild and free" maintained itself in how it inhabited that life. No wings were trapped in the fly paper. No whim was mired in routine. No, this "wild and free" made the life it blessed a perfect wild and free. Free to walk from "carpenters shop", heavy tools, regular income, certain status, into vagrant preaching - and prayer and wonder and "what will happen today?" Free to walk from rabbis in the synagogue saying "you have heard it said" to whispers from wherever saying

"but now / say to you". Free to move from "this is my mother" to "these are my family - those who do my Father's will". This Spirit alights on the life of One who (maybe because of the alighting) sacrifices the structures and certainties of old that gave shape, and limit to his life. Was he just an imaginative soul - that he responded such to the descent of the dove? An old carol at Christmas will sing of him "here is he whom seers and sages sang of old with one accord, whom the voices of the prophets promised in their faithful word", like he'd been prepared since the beginning of time to nurture the "wild and free".

The wild and free descends upon him, like the light and gentle touch of a dove, and life begins.

What, though, if the Spirit had descended not onto a life primed to manifest the ways of God? What if the Spirit descended instead onto a life that was nothing like an openness, but entirely like a cage? A bright and shiny thing - pretty red - but still a cage? That might be a risk, were the Spirit to be breathed into lives other than that of the Christ. As he breathes his "wild and free" into the care of those who have little capacity for, or respect for, or inspiration by the "wild and free"? Is the bird to be trapped in the cage?

The artist presents a cage. Is it dogma? Is it Christian nationalism? Is it tradition filled only with empty space? He places his Spirit doves close to the cage, but not captured by it. His Spirit doves still are free.

When Jesus breathes his Spirit upon his people, it is a risk. His "wild and free" may indeed be trapped, contained by those who do not understand creativity, liberty, life. But the artist puts his Spirit birds outside the cage - as indeed do the best of the sincere and faithful whom we call "people of the Spirit". The Spirit sometimes descends on souls who feel ordinary, but have in fact, like the Christ, been prepared since the beginning time to cultivate the "wild and the free".

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church.



**Reflection:** Above the houses

There's a cute little church in the middle, with a whole lot of houses around it. How about the house next to the church, around one o'clock? It's tall, maybe a bit elegant. It's blue, so maybe it's a house that votes National. In the photo, I can't see any green houses. One house might be red - but the lighting makes it hard to tell. The yellow houses are a funny mixture - one is really quite modest, one is tall and proud. One is straight on one side but kinky on another. Goodness!

In one of the houses, someone has just received a King's Birthday honour, and the press are interviewing him about what the honour means while he juggles pride with his on-going cancer treatment. In another house Jim has just turned 90, and is reflecting on his life - what he's proudest of, whether he ever saw his early experiences of milking the cows on the farm life leading to high office, what advice he might give leaders of today. Top of his list to some leaders is just to "shut up".

In another house Olivia is learning her "Lord's Prayer", so she can say it properly at her first communion on Sunday week. In another house, Peter and Tekky are talking in bed. Tekky's asking Peter if he's nervous about his plans to quit his job on Monday - since no one ever tells him he's doing well, and he's not had a wage rise for three years now. Peter is nervous, but Tekky

thinks he should resign, since he loves him and feels that he's being undervalued.

In another house, Dalphina is replacing the oranges on the little shrine outside their door, since the ancestors are not honoured by oranges beyond their best before date. She'll light the incense sticks and say her prayer. In another house, baby J is being beaten to death by his step-father. In another house, Karen is feeding the black dog that has come to stay with her. Maybe hers is one of the little black houses.



Building whatever it is that looks to contact, flash, discharge, way above the church this great energy assembles. Where does it come from? (Maybe from before all time when it swept across the waters that were to become the world? Maybe from the promise of a Christ who said he'd never leave his people bereft? Maybe from the cheap wine of the people? - well, that's what some will say.) Wherever it comes from, it is said that there is wind to blow and flame to burn - a tongue of fire for every head.

Maybe it won't come to the house of Peter and Tekky, because they're two men having a conversation in bed. Maybe it won't come to Dalphina, because she's a Buddhist. Maybe it won't come to Olivia, because she's learning her prayers rote fashion, rather than praying "in the Spirit" like a true believer. Maybe it won't come to the house of baby J - since he's dead. Karen's not dead, but it's assumed she's so busy with the black dog, she won't notice the light.





The artist presents a wooden book - it's a lovely book, beautifully made, with all sorts of life and wisdom within it. But because it's made of wood (some **cages** are built of wood), it can't be opened. Anything written in it, no matter how profound, is trapped inside. The artist piles up a whole lot of letters (or are they words - not sure, it's all a bit jumbled) on top of the book.

It's an artwork for the meditation of the church (people of the book), but bleeds out into all the world really. For every society that has a "book", the rules of its culture, the stories of its origins, the visions of its big values, the records of its heroes and heroines - there's a sense of its book being sealed by the wood of which it's made. It's not meant to be made of wood . . . But we have this capacity to turn words into piles of stuff that weigh on our books and make communication impossible. Imagine someone not knowing what a hymn is! Silly bloody student.

The artwork of words and letters piled upon the book is offered to a community on a day when we hear of Pentecost. On Pentecost, within the cacophony of noises and sounds, one gospel is heard by all people in their own language. It's as if, today, all languages (all separate worlds - Olivia and her prayer, Peter and Tekky, Karen and her black dog, Dalphina and her oranges) are brought into one speaking. Suddenly all people can hear about who God is, how God loves, what God does, as if it's in their own language. One language today - as if there is one people. Beyond the cages, into every house (Karen, Dalphina, baby J, Peter and Tekky), is God's Spirit able to do that?

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

Shall we deploy a musical artefact designed to give a congregation expression of faith in a cultic expression? No. Let's sing a hymn.

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