

Sermon Archive 569

Sunday 25 January, 2026

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Stevie Wonder Reflections 2/3

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. The style is messy, since it's a verbatim record of the casual language from the interview. I haven't "tidied it up" much.

Annie - How do you feel about the word "retirement"?

Stevie - How do **you** feel about it?

Annie - Not good. I feel quite negatively about it, because it feels like an ending. And I don't like the idea of ending. I don't. If it's concerning me personally, if I'm in a job that I love, I won't want to end it. I might want to change how I do it, but I don't want to end it. So this idea of retiring feels like too definitive.

Stevie - Do you feel that you have more things to do in life?

Annie - 100%

Stevie - Even after you are terminated or you're fired or it's time for you to, whenever, do you feel there's more for you to do in life? For as long as you breathe, for as long as your heart beats, there's more for you to do. So, as far as retiring, I think when it feels like your spirit is saying "okay, chill, enough, do whatever" and talk to the people that I love about "let's go on a vacation, come to California National Park", but I just think "I love playing music". That's like my mantra. So I think I can do all the stuff I want to do, still have fun, and do what I need to do. But I'm not going to stop the gift that keeps pouring through my body. No one wants me doing that. I mean even if I'm not a superstar, whatever, I'm not thinking about that. I love doing what I'm doing, and an artist doesn't stop drawing just because . . . you know. You keep on; so as long as you can imagine is as long as you are going to be creative; and long as you let your mind work, you don't have to retire.

Annie - Have you ever been creatively stuck? Have you ever had writer's block?

Stevie - For a minute. But I always ask God to give me another song.

Annie - And God delivers?

Stevie - Every time.

Annie - Do you think you could have been anything else except for a musician?

Stevie - I think that if I was meant to be someone else, to do something else, it would have happened. This is what I know. This is what God has blessed me to do and be. So I'm satisfied with that.

The First Lesson: Matthew 4: 18-22

Reflection: Vocation

Vocation is not the same as profession. Profession is something we do. Vocation is "doing it because God is calling". When we speak of vocation, rather than profession, we're talking about a sense of religious responsibility. We do what we do, in the way that we do it, because we feel doing so is the will of God.

When Jesus called the disciples away from their fishing, we're told that they followed him immediately. In Matthew's version, we're not given any insight into why they went so quickly. Had some of them perhaps become weary with fishing - long days, smelly fish, the dangers of the lake. Were some of them bored with life in Galilee - needing something to speak to the spark within them that was dying? We don't know. We *like* to think that there was something compelling about Jesus - a charisma immediately recognised (Lord, your summons echoes true). And we like to think that it was a call that changed their lives forever - because that's **vocation**, finding the task to give "god" to human experience.

Twelve people were called to follow him. Later, when thinking about the one who departed, Judas, the community needed to work out why *he* was called. What was his bigger picture **function** throughout the three journeying years? And on a Maundy Thursday night, when swords were drawn, and the Master was taken away, and everyone had fled, they needed to work out whether for all of them three years was all that was required. Was it time now to go back home, get on with a less foolish life - go back fishing?

Stevie is asked about whether he's ever faced writer's block - whether times of dryness have ever made him consider moving on from his creative life. He says "only for a minute, then God delivers". He talks about a conviction that he has more to do, that God wants him to do. He says that while your heart beats, and while you continue to breathe, you don't stop the gift. Maybe we do it differently - but we don't stop, not while we understand our life as a giving gift.

There is profession, and there is vocation. Is the call of God irrevocable? Is our proper response to the call something that has seasons? When Christ says "follow me", what does it mean to retire?

The Second Lesson: Jeremiah 29: 11-14

Reflection: Is there a plan?

Stevie is asked to consider whether he could have been anyone other than Stevie Wonder. In the realm of the philosophy of the Arts, it's called "engagement with the counter-factual"; and it's a rich vein that's often tapped in the realms of written fiction, acted theatre. Invited into realms of what is not, but might have been, into realms of possible situations and hypothetical suggesting, we explore what it might be like to be in someone else's shoes. And by doing so we grow in imagination, in empathy, in options. It's an entirely worthwhile question: "Who ***might*** you have been".

Stevie's response to the question of course comes from someone who has not only global appreciation, but tremendous financial wealth. Current estimates suggest he's worth over US\$200 million. And that kind of financial cushioning might take away some natural curiosity about what else might have been. Had he remained a blind child in a single-parented, financially-stretched household in Detroit, without any recognition, maybe he'd have been more inclined to consider what might have been.

Whatever - From the realm of what actually happened, Stevie answers that surely if God had wanted him to be someone else, then he would have been someone else. He truly believes that he was born to be who he is.

Worth about 199 million dollars less than Stevie is worth, and much less celebrated in the world than he is, do I ***also*** believe that I am born to be who I am? Spoiler alert: yes I do.

When I first came into the Christian faith, it was in a community of younger people who were all growing into who they were. No one knew quite what was around the corner, in terms of where life might turn, in terms of how we might fare -what we might do and who we might be. And a popular Bible verse for us was Jeremiah 29 - "I have a plan for your life - for your welfare, for your hope". For a lot of us who wondered what life would bring, and felt insecure about the life decisions we seemed to be having to make each day, that was a comforting verse. With so many possibilities before us, and no certainty about how things would go, it was a lovely calming, centring "Word from God". Funny it comes back to me now . . .

Now that we are older, some of the possibilities that used to be before us have closed down. Many of the big decisions about life already have been made - as have some of the great fears that worried us. A lot of the "what ifs" have become "yes, it happened", or "no it didn't". The unpainted canvas now has many layers - painted and set. And we, who heard Jeremiah from one vantage point (looking forward), now hear it again from another (looking back).

Has what we have lived been the plan?

The plan, as Jeremiah expressed it, is, I think, an affirmation that God wills for every human being that they should prosper in who they are (blind in Detroit, sighted in Tāmaki Makaurau; minister of religion in Ōtautahi, singer-songwriter in Bel Air, California). And if some of us **aren't** flourishing, or seeming to be in the right place, then maybe it's up to others of us to enable our brothers and sisters to become all whom they can be. If that be sharing some of our US\$200 million to support health or education, or sharing our song for the flourishing of the spirit, or just being kind and supportive . . . then maybe we are people earning the right to speak of plans for good and welfare. "Enablement of the other" becomes currency and street-credibility in the speaking of Jeremiah's vision. We can't quote Jeremiah with integrity, without also saying "who can I help you be? - through the goodness of the Creator".

-ooOoo-

Just before closing, here's a short thought experiment. Imagine a minister in Sydney. Through a series of discouragements, he's decided that he has no future as a minister. So he has resigned, and is working out his notice. A big question, now that he has worked out what his future **isn't**, is what it's going to be instead. He has been corresponding with someone who lives a very expensive flight away. He wonders whether his future might be with that person. He doesn't want to reach the end of his life and have to process the question "why did I not go to meet the person who could have been so important in his life? Could that far-away person have been the "one"? It's a possible future regret he doesn't want to have to deal with. But since he's working out his notice, he's about to enter a time of financial insecurity. He really shouldn't be spending money on flights of fancy. What is he to do? He's kind of over quoting Jeremiah to himself - but what is he to do?

Stevie reckons that if he was meant to be anyone other than who he is, God would have made that happen. "This is what God has blessed me to do and be (he says) - so I'm satisfied with that."

Some prayer over that will be required; but for now we keep a moment of quiet.

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