

Sermon Archive 570

Sunday 1 February, 2026

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Stevie Wonder Reflections 3/3

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 - I wanted to ask you actually about music, because music gives me hope. And I do feel like music can help enact change - social change, political change. I have to believe that. What do you think?

Stevie - Oh well. You know, there's been so many songs that, you know, I talk about Marvin's "What's going on". I think about John Lennon's "Imagine". I think about songs that people have sung - all of it. All of us have sung, and we had something we wanted to say and make a difference. When I received the Oscar for "I just called to say I love you" and the morning before I went to the Oscars (because I wasn't for sure I was going to go) but I was watching the news and there came a thing on talking about how long Nelson Mandela had been in prison. And I said, "damn, you know, like 25 years or whatever. It's horrible". And so I go down there and, you know, I sit in the back of the audience. And first I hear that Prince had won for the score of Purple Rain. And so they played all the various songs, and all of those songs I liked, you know. And then Diana Ross sang "I just called to say I love you". Wow; I said "wow". It was amazing when it happened. Going back a little bit all through that year, before the Oscars, I was in Europe [and] I would have a dream every night, like I'm at the Oscars or whatever, and then it's "and the winner is . . ." and I would wake up just before the winner. Dream, what are you doing to me?! And so, and they said, "and the winner is . . . Stevie Wonder". I couldn't believe it - it was like, oh, and I was excited but like walking up and thinking whatever. And then I was thinking about the people

I wanted to thank. And then I get there and I say something like "I accept this award in honour of Nelson Mandela". And shit started turning, and people saying "what the hell?"

Annie - I mean it shouldn't be controversial ,really, should it? But it was!

Stevie - I think it was hey, but it was from my heart. It's like that made me think about someone thrown in prison as long as he had been, and me getting this Oscar. I took it to that place. And then they banned my music. And then cut me out.

Annie - I know that your music was banned in South Africa for real, wasn't it?

Stevie - Yeah. And I said "ban it; I don't care; whatever. Do what you do". And they banned it . . . I know that I was doing a song called "Apartheid's wrong". And I had some other things - a song called "Dark and Lovely ". And I just continued on with what I felt - about how it was wrong and the things that I felt, I felt. And it **was** wrong. And so I joined with all the people in the States and throughout the world - that, you know, this is bullshit, and it should stop. And I say all that to say when you're in a place where you know something's wrong, you've got to, you've got to speak on it, you know. I have a song you will hear on my next project called "Fear can't put dreams to sleep" and you can't let fear put your dreams sleep. You can't.

The Bible Lesson: Psalm 116: 12-19

Sermon: Sing the song, and lift the cup

Annie asks Stevie whether music can change the world, because she kind of feels that she wants to believe it can. Stevie references a couple of songs he thinks had been important. One was Marvin Gaye's "What's going on". Written in 1971, not by Gaye, but by his musical associate Renaldo Benson, it came from Benson's witnessing police brutality against anti-Vietnam war protesters in Berkley, California. Benson is reported as having said: "I saw this ,and started wondering 'what was going on, what is happening here?' One question led to another. Why are they sending kids far away from their families overseas? Why are they attacking their own kids in the street?" He first offered the song to the Four Tops, but they turned it down. Benson said, "My partners told me it was a protest song. I said 'no man, it's a love song, about love and understanding. I'm not protesting. I want to know what's going on.'"

The lyrics went " Mother, mother, there's too many of you crying. Brother, brother, brother, there's far too many of you dying. You know we've got to find a way to bring some lovin' here today. Father, father, we don't need to escalate. You see, war is not the answer, for only love can conquer hate. Picket lines and picket signs, don't punish me with brutality. Talk to me, so you can see, oh, what's going on."

While the song was conceived as a sincere question, it was taken as a protest - and got mentioned by Stevie as one of the songs that changed the thinking of the times.

The other song, also from 1971, was John Lennon's "Imagine". "Imagine" was an invitation to the listener to consider what it would be like if all the world could get over all the world's differences and just live in peace. Interestingly, one of the differences Lennon considered was religious difference, and he referenced it by inviting people to consider imagining that there's no heaven - no hell below us, above us only sky. it's interesting to note that the "no heaven" clause has moved some to call the song an Atheist Anthem. It is said, but maybe it's only a rumour, that the Filippino Cardinal Antonio Tagle's chances of being elevated to the papacy last year were severely damaged by the release of a video of him singing Imagine at a karaoke event. Whether it was a protest song or not, it was clearly considered to be something of a papal hand grenade.

Stevie thinks that some songs do have power to change the world. He didn't really consider his work "I just called to say I love you" a super-radical assault on anything. He just called to say "I love you". That's not going to cause thrones to fall - or is it? The power of love declared. That's for another sermon.

The problem arose when a politically innocent love song ended up, almost casually, being dedicated to someone whom others considered dangerous. The music was banned. The composer was cancelled. It was just a song - and in fact a very innocent one. Stevie says to the reactive world "I don't care. Do what you do". But he also says "when you're in a place where you know something's wrong, you've **got** to speak on it". Sometimes it's a proper function of faith to protest.

I wish I could remember who it was (but I can't) who said that every time a Christian congregation sings a hymn of faith, it is engaging in a subversive act. The congregation makes a big noise, proclaiming a world view that the

powers of the world would prefer not be heard. To Caesar, we sing the kingdom of Christ. To the powers of death, we sing the Lord of Life. To the mean in spirit, we sing the generosity of God. To Mammon, we sing solid joys and lasting treasures. To sing our Christian faith in a world of gods of tin, is a protest - an act of defiance. Sometimes, even if the singer only wants to sing a love song to a God of love, it becomes a protest, and challenges the world.

I wonder also, whether it's not just what is *sung* - but other things the House of Faith enacts in public view. Centuries ago, a psalmist asks "what shall I do in response to what God has done?" The decision is made: in the presence of all the people, I will lift the cup and call upon the name of God". Not in the closet. Not in the private space. Not a gentle gesturing towards the cup of salvation - but a bold lifting up of God in the presence of all the people.

Where the world says "you must find your own drink", and be resigned when people thirst, we lift up the cup. Where the world says God will not feed you, we offer wine to everyone. Where the world says "life occurs within Caesar's realm, we raise the cup as a toast to our living in God's world. Is that a protest? Singing God's songs; lifting God's cup; being God's people.

A few weeks ago, someone said this: "We live in a world in which you can talk all you want about international niceties and everything else. But we live in a . . . real world . . . that is governed by strength, that is governed by force, that is governed by power. These are the iron laws of the world. We're a superpower, and . . . we are going to conduct ourselves as a superpower."

That was one of the most "dark heart" statements of recent time. From what kind of culture did it come? From what kind of value system? From what kind of religion? What's going on? Imagine a world at peace. I just called to say "I love you" before my words are banned.

Meanwhile, in this house in Ōtautahi, we are given a cup to lift - and we're going to lift it high.