

## Sermon Archive 571

Sunday 8 February, 2026

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reflections for Waitangi Day

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



### **An Introduction:** Strange little story about a guitar

Decades ago I tried to learn the guitar. First, I got a really good teacher. Second, I got a really good guitar. It was a black and white American-built Fender Telecaster, worth about \$1,700.00. Alas, not even all the best gear and tutoring made up for my pronounced lack of talent. The expensive guitar ended up languishing many decades in a spare room closet. Five years ago I decided that hiding in a closet was no better for my guitar than it had been for me. It's just such a waste. So, I made some ineffective efforts to sell it. Selling proved far from simple, so it remained in the closet.

A few years ago someone at the supermarket told me he was sad about how his university exams had gone. He sensed a door was closing. He thought his chosen course of study was not really for him. Asking him what **was** for him, I heard that he was most happy when playing guitar. I dropped my guitar off at the customer service counter, asking that the gift be anonymous.

Just a few weeks ago, at the checkout, he asked me "was it you who gave me the guitar?" In response, I said "I don't have a guitar".

Going home, I felt really pleased with myself. I hadn't told a lie, but had stumbled into a perfect deflection. Sometimes we use language skilfully, to hide the truth. Shame I've spilled the beans here in such a public way. I'm sure no one will share what I have divulged.

### **The First Lesson:** Matthew 5: 33-37

#### **A Reflection:** Honour the word

Jesus calls us to consider a world where "yes" means yes, and "no" means no. There's no dissembling. There's no making slippery of what we mean. He also talks about the ways that we throw things around our words to make them seem more secure than they are. After the claims we make, we say "I swear by my mother's grave". Actually, Jesus has people swearing by heaven (which is the throne of God). They swear by earth (which is the

footstool of God). They swear by Jerusalem (God's lovely city - of which the people are proud). Some swear by the hair of their head - of which Jesus makes the charming observation that hair colour is something over which no one has any power. Can you, by force of will, make your hair turn white or black? Jesus wonders why people are inclined to do this - reinforce their words by swearing on anything really. Just let your "yes" be yes, and "no" be no.

He also says that the main thing is to "carry out the vows that you have made to the Lord". There is something here of the spirit of keeping the language simple, avoiding distracting matters, while all the while being true to the promises that you have made.

There are promises **you** didn't need to make, but **you** made them. Keep them.

There are promises that **we** didn't need to make, but **we** made them. Keep them.

The honourable thing, the faithful thing, the Jesus thing, when a promise is made, is to consider the promise as if made to God, and to honour it. This reflection could well be called "keep the word".

Ah yes, Jesus; we did make various promises to the others in the house; but you know, what did we **mean** by the promises we made? And what place is there for what the people to whom we made the promises make of our words. You know, languages bump into one another, and there's definitely a difference between a lie and a deflection.

He says "let 'yes' mean yes; let 'no' mean no; keep your word".

-ooOoo-

You might think that the preacher was tired when he wrote this sermon. He seems to have forgotten it's a sermon for Waitangi Day. He hasn't even mentioned Waitangi.

I have one thing to say: I don't have a guitar.

### **Music for Reflection**

**The Second Lesson:** Psalm 127: 1-2

**A Reflection:** Build the house

In a pot, on the patio outside my house in Papanui, is a small tōtara tree. Although it's small, I call it the "Mighty Tōtara" - since as we know, ahakoa

he iti, he pounamu (although it's small, it's precious). The Mighty Tōtara's ancestors used to be numerous in the neighbourhood. The whole of Papanui was a tōtara forest - until the construction needs of the ever-expanding Garden City down the road caused people to chop the trees down. Many mighty tōtara fell in the forest. Processed into building materials, the one-time trees were hauled into town to build our shops, houses, churches and halls. It was progress. We were making a home. The birds of the forest no longer sang. The eels in the creek no longer swam. The wēta on the forest floor no longer scuttled under the leaves. We were making a home.

Once denuded of the forest, the now open land of Papanui was available for still more shops, houses, churches and halls. Eventually, one of the houses to stand on the land was the one in which I now live. I call it "home". From my home, I cannot undo what happened. I cannot find (anywhere in my pockets, or even my bottom drawer) a Papa-nui - a wide land of forest. But I can plant a tree. Within this story of plunder and displacement for home-building, I can plant a tree.

If times are kind, the tree will live centuries longer than I will. When I have fallen as silent as the birds, eels and wēta of old Papanui, this tree still will stand. If I live not for another century, but for a decade or two, then I will witness it becoming taller than I am - maybe giving me shade from the sun. If the wind blows through its leaves, it may whisper to me words of restoration, of things "made good". These are possibilities in the garden.

-ooOoo-

Beyond my garden, over the fence between private and public, there is a country - it also has a story of home making. Part of the story is plunder and displacement. How does the story being? Some of us (of the country) were already here, making a pretty good go at it. Then some more of us arrived - on ships taller than ever seen here before. Some coming off the ships were of goodwill. Some were willing to learn culture and language, and history. Others not so much. It seemed good to all of us to share our home, one with another - host with guest, guest with host. So we worked out a plan for the sharing and called it "a treaty".

Percentages of land area recognised as the domain of the hosts. 1860, 80%. 1890, 40%. 1910, 27%. 1939, 9%. 2000, 4%. The forest has gone - taken into town to build our shops, houses, churches and halls.

In the garden, I know that I cannot return the forest. I can only plant a tree. Beyond the garden, does the same principle apply? And if it does, what are the trees that we might plant?

There have been crown apologies. There have been treaty settlements. There have been commitments to honour the language, until recently. Are **these** the trees we might plant. And if they **are**, are they the sort that will grow until they are taller than we are, and can give us shade from the sun, and put a beauty into the world of "things put right, and being just in the right place - like a mighty tōtara, resplendent in the new-growing forest?

We have made a home. Part of the story has been of displacement. Part has been of planting new things in hope. These are possibilities not for the garden, but for the country.

-ooOoo-

Outside someone's Papanui home, in a pot in the garden, there is a symbol of "new possibility". Outside the garden, in a country that is our home, small things grow. They look for good people to nurture them.

Above the garden and the country, above (but somehow also inhabited by it) a great wisdom declares "unless the Lord builds the house, the labourers labour in vain". The great wisdom calls for us to consider the principles of a God-built house. Were God to be building the house, how might the building be done?

The foundation stone for the new house is the One who came into the world in love. He came to serve, not to be served. He came not to occupy the palaces and places of power. He came to dine with sinners and lift up the lowly. He came to bless the meek, the merciful, the mourning, the poor in spirit and the peace-makers. He came not to seize and confiscate, but to restore and redeem. Maybe these are the dynamics of God building the house. Are these true possibilities for us, as we continue building this small country at the bottom of the world?

Based on two readings, those were two Waitangi Day reflections. Honour your word. Build the house.

We keep a moment of quiet.

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