

Sermon Archive 606

Sunday 11 October, 2026

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Remembering, and wishing gladness

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Lesson: Psalm 106: 1-5

Reflection: Wishing them God's gladness

It is written: "Happy are those who act with justice and always do what is right." Well, in that case, my God, some of us are going to be happy some of the time - almost! I jest, my God - you know that (since you know everything). And I know what the psalmist was saying - that there is a wholesome satisfaction (the tip of a deeper peace) that comes when we find ourselves in harmony with you - with what you have done - with what you have enabled us to do - harmony with the best of the story of humanity walking with its god. "Remember us, O God, that we may see the prosperity of your elect, and be glad with the gladness of your people." Be glad with the gladness of your people . . . Help us to remember.

There's something about the way that the psalm is structured that moves me in poignant remembrance of people I've met along the way. The psalmist is remembering the great works of God, and longing to see the people prosper, longing to see gladness abound. Remembering, and longing to witness gladness.

-ooOoo-

On a street that runs along the ridge which falls down towards the Manukau Harbour, up in Blockhouse Bay, there's a building. It was home to a community of disciples who loved their Lord and their community. Their Session Clerk, in the days when tattoos still spoke of roughness, was a tattooed glazier from Glasgow. When he welcomed me as his minister, he told me that had I been a woman, he would have resigned. [My successor at Blockhouse Bay was a very gifted woman who worked well with the Session Clerk. He didn't resign when she arrived, but learned a new theology of ministry. Had God, perhaps, been at work? Is this one of God's great deeds?] We had a treasurer who was thin outside, but fat inside, and wouldn't let a small matter of open heart surgery stop him from doing the accounts. We had someone called Don, who had hair growing out of the top of his nose (not from his nostrils) - who loved classic

technology (cassette tapes) and provided us with a Public Address System. We had Margaret, considered by many to be a saint - she had worked in a bank. We had Helen, who had Huntington's Disease, and whose violin had been mounted on the wall of her living room as an objet d'art - now it couldn't be played. We had a group of teenagers, and a group of elderly grandmothers whose job it was to growl at the teenagers when they wore baseball caps to church.

I didn't stay with them for very long. My feet were itchy. I remember the gentle deeds that God did among us. I remember the moments of gladness - and I continue to want for them prosperity. Apparently the congregation is a bit smaller these days, and they have problems about building codes and earthquake standards. But they're still there. I built them. They built me. In God, we build one another. I wish for them gladness.

There's another building up North, somewhere leafy between a lake and a beach. It is the home to another community within which God did mighty deeds. God took care of a wee family that had much to deal with - giving them friends who provided stability and safety. God provided strength to a woman who needed to care for her son who lived with scary voices and awful thoughts. God put courage into the heart of a whistle-blower, who brought down a long-lived secrecy and silence. God provided a woman with friends who could say creeds in church (I believe in God who has created and is creating) when, following the death of her son, couldn't say she believed in anything. "They are believing for me" she used to say. (The deeds of God are done quietly among whom the people we remember.)

My feet were less itchy then, so I stayed a bit longer. They're still there. I built them. They built me. In God, we build one another. I wish for them gladness.

There's a building in Sydney, in a good part of town. I've spoken of this community before - so you'll know the feelings swirling around this place are rather more complicated. My parents attended my induction service there - to see the potential cocoon into which their son had agreed to venture - isolated from his Kiwi support systems, a wee bit vulnerable. One particularly harsh person button-holed them in a corner of the church hall afterwards and said "he won't stay! They never do, here. He'll be far too soft". You can imagine that that made Mum and Dad feel fabulous. The harsh person didn't hate me; in fact she was very concerned when her diagnosis came through that I would be available to bury her. And I did. Years after leaving there (since the harsh woman was right - I didn't stay long), I heard that another person who caused me much grief during my greatly inglorious time there, had developed severe dementia. I heard the news, gauged my feelings, and

called myself back into harmony with the best of the story of humanity walking with its god. In considering this for the writing of this reflection, I feel like I have engaged in something of a letting go. Within the complexity, we still affirmed God as a God of mighty acts and gracious deeds. (It's just that the mighty acts and gracious deeds are harder, sometimes, to spot.) For the community that continues to be there, I wish gladness proper to the people of God. They're still there. I built them. They built me. In God, we build one another.

I wonder who has built you - and whom you have built. I wonder what communities you've been part of, and how the deeds of God have been manifest in your sharing of life. The simple claim of the psalm is that God has been present in the life of the people - and that a godly spiritual exercise is that of wishing gladness for the people among whom we stand - and among whom we have stood.

Remembering them. Wishing one another well - an inheritance of goodwill - an inheritance of gladness.

Music for Reflection

Lesson: Philippians 4: 1-9

Reflection: Affection, nostalgia, and where to focus

With great affection, Paul is looking back on the people whom God has placed into his life story - the ones whom he has made, and who have made him. There's a real vibe of thanksgiving; he uses the word "love", the words "long for"; "you are my crown, my joy". In true Psalmic fashion, maybe his joy is flowing into a prayer of hoping for their prosperity and gladness. The text is warm!

Perhaps he also is managing two temptations.

When we remember people from the past, **one** temptation is that of nostalgia - making everything more rosy than it was. For this reason, maybe it's important to include acknowledgement of conflict between the ones who've formed us. This might be particularly important for those who formed within broken families, or care that went wrong, or times of war. Maybe nostalgia needs managing by including in the story the harsh woman of Sydney. Certainly, as soon as Paul waxes lyrical about the goodness of the people in Philippi, he acknowledges that Euodia and Syntyche are hating each other. Irony really, given that the meaning of the name Euodia is "good way" or

"sweet fragrance" and Syntyche means "fortunate" or "pleasant acquaintance". In Paul's reality, the good way and the pleasant acquaintance need their heads banging together (or at least their minds bringing together)! Reality diffuses nostalgia.

As reality diffuses nostalgia, a second temptation is to believe that God's form of human community is so fallen and conflicted that it has no power to nourish that within us that is of God. As they argue, the Christians sabotage themselves. So the church, as a vehicle for blessing (even salvation) grinds to a halt. Did I mention that some years ago I took minutes for a national gathering of Presbyterians in Wellington. The meeting had been called to consider mission strategies. The long and short of the minutes was that there was no point in strategizing about mission while the church itself was tearing itself apart in emotionally violent arguments about power and gate-keeping. The temptation was to give up on the body of Christ being a blessing - a vehicle for gladness among the people of God. I note, in Paul's description of conflict within the church, that while Euodia and Syntyche are arguing, names quietly are being written in the book of life.

Paul's final plea, in his letter to the people whom he remembers with love and affection, is that they cultivate the capacity to think on **these** things:

- that which is honourable and just,
- that which is pure and pleasing,
- that which is commendable and excellent,
- that which is worthy of praise.

"Think on that which is good", says Paul; "rejoice when you can", and the God of peace will be present.

Would it not be a good thing to look back on the life that we have lived together, and see it littered with the honourable and the good? Give thanks to God, who is good, whose mercy endures forever. Happy are we, who see prosperity emerging for the elect, and who share in the gladness of the people.

A moment of quiet.

The Knox Church website is at: <http://www.knoxchurch.co.nz.html> . Sermons are to be found under News / Sermons.