

## Sermon Archive 161

Sunday 6 August, 2017

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Matthew 5: 1-12

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



There's a group of five male meerkats at Orana Park. Four of them are brothers, all from the same litter born at Wellington Zoo. The fifth is a cousin, born in London. He's well integrated in the group, doing within it all the usual things that meerkats do. Usual meerkat activity includes digging tunnels in the sand. It includes ripping open rotten logs, looking for insects. It includes grooming another - which is very cute to watch. Also on the list of regular behaviour is that seemingly unplanned but always effective practice of having at least one of them, at all times, on sentry duty. If four of them are digging or insect farming, one will always refrain from it, instead being erect on his hind legs - looking out for predators. Looking out for predators is a deeply ingrained instinct. He'll do that until he stops, when immediately another one will assume the duty. No one's quite sure about **how** the sentry mantle's passed on and picked up, but it is. To that slightly mysterious extent, meerkats demonstrate cooperation, an almost mystical shared responsibility for protection and welfare. One of the words often used to describe normal meerkat behaviour is the word "altruistic". They're social animals; they take care of one another - normally.

We introduce the reality of stress. Various things stress meerkats. When people climb onto barriers, or lean over barriers, or throw things over barriers, meerkats experience stress. When big groups of people make large amounts of noise, meerkats experience stress. When large things appear in the sky, like low-flying aircraft, meerkats experience stress. When the female meerkat in the adjoining enclosure goes on heat, filling the air with smells that humans can't smell, meerkats experience stress. We think that that might be what's happening at the moment. How do we know our group is stressed? We can tell because of changes in behaviour. Every time this group is stressed, the four brothers turn on their cousin. He's not the cause of the stress; it's nothing he's doing. But whenever stress is introduced, it all

gets directed at him - the latest to arrive, slightly different one. A bite to his tail, rejection from group activity, the making more rigid of the previously benign pecking order. Stress an animal - groups will form, hierarchies will flex, alpha animals will bite the underdog.

Thank goodness human beings don't act like that!

At the moment five Kiwi soldiers are deployed, under the auspices of the United Nations' Command Military Armistice Commission, in the demilitarized zone on the Korean Peninsular. In a recent television interview, the senior Kiwi soldier described the work he does. His main responsibility is communicating messages from the South side to the North side. He describes the diplomatic protocols he follows. When he has something to communicate, he is to ring a telephone that is never answered. That would have been the phone line on which he'd deliver his message. When it's not answered, he's required to ring another telephone that's also never answered. That's where he's meant to speak to someone about his moving onto his next step - hand delivering a message to the border. No one answers that phone either - but its ringing is code for the other side to expect him to do the next thing. The next thing is to take a piece of paper in person (with the message on it) up to a meeting point way out in the open, observed by people on the North and the South. He hands the piece of paper over. In the exchange no one speaks. Not speaking appears to be part of the strategy for avoiding potentially enflaming misunderstanding. If you don't speak, no uttered words can be misunderstood. Our soldier confesses to having found the modus operandi very strange at the start - not speaking, not picking up the phone - an odd dance around not speaking. But now he understands that it's all part of a very delicately balanced calm. It's his job to be calm, to keep those around him calm, to project towards those on the other side as sense of calm - to be as quiet as possible. Ordinary sentry life in the stress zone requires calm.

Into the delicately balanced calm between sentry keepers and sharers in welfare and protection, let's introduce an element of elevated stress. Let's have one of the community climb onto the barrier, lean over the barrier. Let's have someone make large amounts of noise or put something big in the sky. Let's release some kind of smell (that human beings can't smell) but that sets the alpha animals into a whirl. (Is fear something that can be

smelled?)

Here we go! Pyongyang launches another ballistic missile. This one appears more capable than previous ones to fly over the safety barrier. Washington's reaction is to tell China that it should be doing more to pull the North back into heel, and reminds China of American might. China responds by holding a military parade (I'm not sure whether it's for North Korea's benefit or for the benefit of the United States). Behold our army! How big it is! North Korea responds by having its own military parade - featuring more of the big things that previously appeared in the sky. It's as if the immediate response to any kind of stress, on any side, is to show others your army. Threat for threat. Army for army. Fear for fear - equal mutual fears keeping the terror in just the right balance. Push back, or push sideways, or push in any direction at all! It's the recurring alpha animal response to stress.

It's not just on the military stage that we can see this kind of stress response. It's also present in the political domain. Personified perfectly by Anthony Scaramucci, the ten day Whitehouse communications **director**, whereas once upon a time the "**direction** of public communication" may have been about clarity, care, and sometimes even concern for truth, political communication recently became something else. In an interview with CNN, the brand new Mr Scaramucci was asked about his personal financial disclosure statement. It had been released to the press under regular "freedom of information" protocols. Rather than respond to questions about what was in the document, he immediately accused his colleagues of leaking the information. He called Reince Priebus, the President's Chief of Staff a "felon and f\*\*\*ing paranoid schizophrenic" - and demanded that he be fired. He accused his administration's chief strategist, Steve Bannon, of masturbation. He said these things in a public interview, in response to questions about something completely else. Biting the tail. Excluding from group activity (you're fired). Making lots of noise - launching the missile. An alpha animal responding primitively to stress.

One commentator noted that Scaramucci's performance was "an embarrassment, even by [quote / unquote] the lowered standards of this

administration". The fact that he served for only ten days before the greater alpha animal fired him, suggests that that kind of performance is not the new standard for public discourse. Perhaps it sits in the public space more as an example of a cautionary tale - and yet other less pronounced examples of the same thing (alpha response to stress) become gradually more common.

Jesus assumes the teaching position before his disciples. Interestingly, in his culture the teaching position is that of being seated. There is no looming over others, no standing-over behaviour. Jesus sits low and low-key on the landscape, keeping small. He speaks to them of an alternative way of living, of communicating, of seeking, of being in the world of being human. The world he imagines belongs to the poor in spirit and the meek. It belongs to those who hunger for what is right. It belongs to the merciful and the pure in heart. It belongs to those who would make not war, but peace. He declares all people like this to be blessed. And he promises them that they will inherit the earth.

I guess that's quite bad news for the alpha animals who are doing their best to steal the earth away. But it's good news for the earth.

Human beings have the capacity to put things on the scales of terror. We have an innate inclination to respond to stress in destructive ways. 72 years ago we exercised our inclination by dropping nuclear warheads on civilian populations. We also, however, have the capacity to hear what Jesus said to his disciples. The way of blessedness, the impossible vision of a different way of life.

There's a group of five meerkats at Orana Park. You know full well what they do when stressed. But can you guess what God's people can do when beatitudes stress their spirits?

Comfort. Inheritance. The filling of hunger. The giving of mercy. The seeing of God. The stepping away from our tragic role as alpha animals, into our identity as God's very children.

On peace Sunday, we keep a moment of quiet.

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