

## Sermon Archive 216

Sunday 7 October, 2018

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Genesis 2: 18-25 9: 30-37

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



A long, long time ago, I can still remember standing with a friend on the far side of Lake Wakatipu, looking east across the water, with the massive mountains hemming us in on the sides. We'd arrived, just the two of us, at Mount Nicholas Station camp site a day ahead of the lucky fourteen year olds of the John McGlashan College boarding house who were going to spend a week at camp. My friend and I were looking for the right place to hold the Sunday evening service. Standing in the silence, looking into the scene, becoming part of the scene, my friend then said to me "now *this* is my kind of cathedral".

Something like Tekapo's Church of the Good Shepherd, just without the walls, it *was* a place in which to be inspired. "O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder consider all the works thy hand has made . . ."

Around this same time, I used to find other people, in other situations, telling me that they didn't feel any need for church. "The garden is my church" they'd say. The park is my church; the river is my church, the beach is my church. "When I look up from lofty mountain grandeur, and hear the brook, and feel the gentle breeze, then sings my soul . . ."

There was a man in Blockhouse Bay, whose name was Jack Finnigan. He spoke openly about his journey from alcoholism, through the Twelve Steps programme, out into a now well-settled sobriety. He told me that once a day he made time to take off his shoes and socks, go out into the garden, and walk across some grass. There was something about walking unprotected across the green garden ground, something about being a creature within the natural order, that centred him. Connected in a tactile, original way with the natural world with which he was one - was one of the ways he talked to that higher power the Twelve Steps had called him to acknowledge. I believe in God, the maker of heaven and earth. "When through the woods and forest glades I

wander, and hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees, then sings my soul 'How great thou art'."

I have the beauty of the garden. I have a kind of engagement with it that makes me feel like God and I are speaking, in conversation. That is my church. I need no more. That's what is said.

Genesis 2 finds the first human being, Everyman, Adam, in a beautiful garden. There is fruit on the trees, grass beneath his feet, some kind of presence or engagement with the lovely scene that Adam feels like he's talking to God. He has the river, the field, the food. He has the mountains, the lake, the loveliness. He has his conversation with God - the One to whom the world's existence is worshipfully attributed. In the previous version of the creation story, at every stage, God has said "this is good". The first day is good. The second day is good. The sky is good and the dirt of the earth is good. At the end of it all, God declares everything is good. Behold, in all its crowning, crowing glory, it is good.

Suddenly, at the start of the next creation story, God says something is not good. One thing fails to be good. And it is this: within the goodness of the garden, confronted by all the beauty and peace of it, festooned with rightness and balance and richness and blessing, the human being, this solitary creature (well no, he's not solitary, because he's been able to talk to God), has become lonely. Adam is lonely. And the God who is wisdom and wonder, who is creativity and kindness, knows that this is not good.

I wonder whether that might, if we go on a highly anthropomorphised journey here, have been confusing or sad for God to learn. Would there have been a disappointment that the Adam was lonely, when God had taken care to speak to him, provide for him, protect him. "How could he be lonely, when he's got me!?" And anyone who has ever tried to companion a lonely person, only to find that it's not enough, knows something of that kind of pain. The insulted offer. The declined present. The dismissal of the power of your good intent. If we were going to allow ourselves this anthropomorphised thought-experiment, we might feel we need to give God a hug.

But in this story, there is no need for that. Perhaps God has broad shoulders, or perhaps God's concern for the lonely human is so strong that God just keeps

focus. If the Adam is lonely, then a helper, a partner needs to be found.

Adam is sitting in his armchair, and there's a cat on his lap. The cat is sleeping, purring, being warm. Adam puts the key in the front door, and the dog bounces out to meet him, tongue blowing behind the mouth in a great momentum of love and enthusiasm. (I love you so much, I miss you so much, welcome home.) Adam sees the tiger prowling through the jungle, the giraffe flashing her eyelashes from behind the tops of the trees. Adam hears the korimako sing, and the kea call, and kakariki chatter. The garden fills up with all manner of life, and the variety is wonderful; and God takes the trouble of introducing Adam to each one - asking him to name them, speak out loud what and who they are. God is trying to bond Adam to these beautiful things. The natural order is singing, the mountains are standing, the lake is teeming with life; now **that** is my kind of cathedral.

But for the Adam, there was not found for him a helper as his partner. The God who perceives loneliness, perceives it still. Just as the company of the wholly Other, the transcendent and wise One, was not enough, so neither is company of this rich natural ecosystem of life. Despite its beauty, and its givenness to the human being, still he's lonely. Adam, still, is lonely. I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder; I walk the fields, I hear the babbling river. It is revealed to me. It gives itself to me. It says "this is your cathedral". The loneliness remains.

God's last attempt to fill the emptiness, to meet the loneliness, to bless the Adam, is the gift of the other human being. And when Adam sees her, he cries "This, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh". No longer is he lonely.

Any one of us, this morning, could be in a garden. Any one of us could be in a park. Any one of us could have gone down to the river, taken off our shoes for the walk across the grass. Any one of us could have sought that other cathedral. We are **here** - have come to be where other people are. Is it because there is, deep within us, a longing for human company? And is this why the story of the incarnation, of God becoming a human being and living among other human beings, and reflecting on what the Spirit was blowing

human experience into be, is so powerful. Meeting God, seeing the divine, giving ourselves to hope as God gives us the company of the other human being.

This creation story has been used, over centuries, by Christians wanting to build a theology of marriage, of sexuality, of the foundational nature of a natural order procreation dogma. It's been used to stratify men and women, and who helps whom, and whether being a mere second-arrival rib is an excuse for women to be the subordinate possessions of men.

I think all that misses the delightful, simple first reading of this story. In seeing first this other creature - who is like him - his loneliness flees. The one who is like him, the other human being, human company (even more than divine conversation or the beauty of nature's cathedral) is what the Adam needs if he is to be kept from the loneliness. (A creature like me. The gift of the other human being.)

I am not someone who has found **the** other human being. I have not received the gift of someone with whom I can stand on the steps of a church sanctuary and say the word "forever". But I know human friendships, and I have known the love of parents. I talk to others, see others, listen to others. There is something in the conversation with others, and walking with others, and singing with others, and being with others who are like me, in which I know the goodness of God - God who wants to end human loneliness.

-ooOoo-

A long, long time ago, I can still remember standing with a friend on the far side of Lake Wakatipu - looking east across the water, with the massive mountains hemming us in on the sides. Standing in the silence, looking into the scene, becoming part of the scene, my friend said to me "now **this** is my kind of cathedral". And because I hear this from another human being - standing next to me - I say "and **this** is mine". Amen.

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