

Sermon Archive 266

Sunday 20 October, 2019

Knox Church, Christchurch

The Blessing of the Animals

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Coming up, we have the story of a human being, a fish, and a worm. What will the animals teach us? Here we go.

I consider the story of Jonah to be an allegory. It's a story, based on the life of a real person, but told in a way so as to include the reader (including readers 2,700 years later), and to encourage them to think about their own religious responsibility and hope.

Jonah was called by God to tell the wicked people of Nineveh, a big and decadent city, to consider their conscience, and reform their ways. Since they were a formidable people, Jonah wasn't keen at all. Rather than confront them, as he believed God wished him to do, he got on a boat, planning on sailing in the opposite direction. He was running away from his conscience. So it was, that he found himself moving in the wrong direction, accompanied by innocent, plain, decent working sailors employed on the boat he'd boarded. Coming into a great storm, which was God's response to his moving in the wrong direction, he and the sailors did all the usual "why is this happening to us" things. It is discerned by all those on board, that Jonah (running from the realm of conscience) was the problem for the boat. He needed to go. Where do you go from a boat in the ocean? How do you survive once you've gone?

Hear the Word of God.

Jonah 1: 11-17

Following the ship experience, and his being preserved in the belly of a great, mysterious fish (as if that is physically likely), Jonah finally relents. He goes to Nineveh, to deliver the message he's been given: that the wicked city is about to be destroyed. As it happens, when the people hear

Jonah's message, they repent and change their ways. Consequently, God forgives them, and decides against destruction. The city continues in its life - no destruction, remembering the now-wrong words of Jonah: "you shall be destroyed".

Feeling ambushed by God, and a bit of a wally in the eyes of the people, Jonah goes into a sulk. It would have been better for him, and his reputation, and the worth of his words, had the people been destroyed.

Hear the Word of God.

Jonah 4: 5-11

-ooOoo-

Gathering around the folly of the human being in this story, two animals present themselves. A great fish, and a tiny, hungry worm.

-ooOoo-

The great fish. Remember that this is an allegory . . .

The great fish lives in the ocean. For human beings, the ocean is a foreign place - somewhere kind of frightening. In the folklore, the world was rescued from the chaos, as land was raised up from the sea. The sea was, then, in the heart and memory of the people a place of demons and darkness - full of connotations of things gone wrong - not where human beings ought to be. The ocean is somewhere for the human being to drown - to die. Not so for the fish! For the fish, the waters are just the natural environment. In the waters it swims; it procreates, it eats, and defecates. It does all the natural things God requires of it, and makes it for - and it lives! There is this creature of God, designed by God to operate in an environment in which the human being ordinarily would drown. Clever God for inventing such a creature! And *merciful* God, for providing such a creature for Jonah, who's in the middle of drowning. The creature designed for the hostile environment provides shelter for the drowning human being.

This week Stuart Nash, the Minister of Police, has said he wants to form legislation about drug testing at music festivals. The situation at the

moment is that people (mainly young people) at music festivals are being offered party pills by those wanting to make lots of money. Some of the pills are laced with things like paint and poison. These pills cause people to die. As young people make excited but dubious decisions, and as a sea threatens to drown them, a group of lab technicians called "Know Your Stuff" is wanting to provide a drug testing facility at the festivals. (Bring a sample of the drugs you're planning to take, and we'll test it for you - we'll let you know what's in your pills.) People well designed to operate in the pill environment are wanting to help people from drowning. At the moment, though, provision of such drug advice is illegal, and the testers are vulnerable to prosecution. Stuart Nash wants to attend to that. There seems, however, insufficient support in parliament for it all just now. Some are saying that "providing advice for safe use of drugs" is simply encouragement for drug use. The same was said of the needle exchange programme in Sydney in the 1980s - a programme that was part of a demonstrably effective strategy against the spread of AIDS in Australia. Skilled medics, researchers, drug users, sex workers, and other street-wise people (fish living in the ocean) provided help to those who were running from good choice and drowning.

Jonah is taken in (swallowed, indeed) by the fish and saved from drowning. He is given a safe place, away from the drowning waters, by a fish that God provides. We learn from the fish. And that's enough about the fish.

Now for the worm.

Further on in the story of Jonah, we find the rescued human being in a sulk. He's spoken for God, setting out that God will destroy, and God has had a change of mind. No destruction has come today - which **has** made Jonah look a bit silly in the public domain. And reputation-bruised Jonah is far from happy. For the sake of his public reputation, he'd much rather that the people had been destroyed. As the people live, Jonah goes out beyond the city to brood and harbour his hatred. In the heat of the day, he finds position under a wee bush (a shrub, a tree,

whatever) that shelters him from the heat. Until God appoints a worm - to eat away at the sheltering herb. The worm, appointed by God (just as the fish was provided by God), comes in, does what worms do, and eats up the shelter. How annoying for God to appoint such a worm!

The worm, the work of the worm, contributes to Jonah learning that people are precious, and never should be destroyed. As a worm eats away at the thing under which sulking humanity shelters, humanity learns not to wish for the destruction of sister and brother - and indeed the destruction of animals as well.

Where should we go this week, for instances of sulking humanity, preferring the destruction of human beings to the loss of public reputation? (Could I go to a Western leader who withdraws his troops to allow chaos to break out in Syria? Could it go to an Eastern leader who threatens to sacrifice refugees [people] as a weapon against Europe? Let the people suffer and die for our political gain!) In the interests of a shorter sermon for our animal friends, I will speak of that no more. What shall we learn from the worm?

-ooOoo-

Once again, a curious animal story - this time of fish and worms! This time leading us to think of saving and sheltering those who are drowning. This time leading us to think of sympathy for the city - of the high calling to care for all things that live.

We keep a moment of quiet.