

## Sermon Archive 273

Sunday 8 December, 2019

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: Isaiah 11: 1-10

Matthew 3: 1-12

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Once upon a time, long ago, when I was still a walk-about guide at Orana Wildlife Park, I found myself with a bit of a crisis in the farmyard. The farmyard is an area with a pig sty, a hen house, a paddock with some sheep. The ubiquitous ducks weren't planted there, but flew in and out anyway – because that's what ducks do. Also present was a group of turkeys – one male and a gaggle of females. The favourite pastime of the male was to puff himself up, make deep drum-like noises, and bring colour and volume to his snood – the snood being that flap of flesh near the base of his beak. He did all this, of course, to impress the females and entice them to mate. For the sake of the perpetuation of the species, it's important that this kind of behavior happens, and it's important that it's effective. Did I mention that this was a crisis? With a small group of children looking on, the male turkey began to perpetuate his species. With one chosen female, the mating began. **That** wasn't the crisis; going to a zoo is going into a place where natural behaviour is likely to happen. You can always say to the children "when one turkey loves another turkey very much . . ." You know what I mean; it's not a crisis. More of a crisis is when the turkey mating is really violent – to a point of it looking like one turkey is going to kill the other.

Watching what was going on, a display of natural behaviour, knowing that intervention in natural behaviour is something that the management avoid, I found myself considering telling the children just to look away.

Down the other end of the park, some dead animal has its carcass chained to a mid-level branch of a tree on a grassy knoll in the enclosure of a pack of African Wild Dogs. Let out of their contained space onto the grassy

knoll, they race to the tree, jump up to reach the carcass, dislodge it from the branch and tear it to pieces. The abiding sound for me is the sound of the racing paws on the ground, and the yelping. They yelp as they rip the carcass to bloody shreds.

There is, in the natural world, a model called "predator and prey". One living thing uses another living thing to keep on living. Always part of this transaction, though, is that one living thing is killed. It becomes food for the other. That's the basic fact of "predator and prey".

Of course, it's an expression that sometimes gets broadened beyond the basic animal example. Sometimes you'll hear human beings, who are not literally eating other human beings, described as "predators". It's meant to describe something about bad, selfish, unequal relationship in which one prospers, and one suffers. And because we've already heard from the turkeys, let's not go to that realm. Instead, consider the owner of the big supermarket chain, and the owner of a small, local dairy. The small local dairy has been economically viable - just - because the owner works long hours and the whole family chip in as they are able. It's not unusual to see, through the plastic strip fly screen door out to the back, the elderly woman nursing her grandchild, watching the shop while the owner's out getting supplies. They work hard - so it only just works.

A large supermarket moves in over the road. Economy of scale, and existing robustness through being part of a chain that's already well-resourced, means that they can offer specials the dairy can't match. They offer the specials only until the dairy owner gives up and goes out of business. Then they put the prices back up again - because the local competition has gone. The eater, the eaten. The consumer, the consumed. The tearing to pieces of that which is smaller. If it had been an even match, you'd call it "competition". But because it's big against small, strong against vulnerable, you can legitimately call it "predator and prey". Common in the world as it is, beyond the animal realm, predator and prey.

The prophet has a dream - a vision of the world as it should be - maybe could be. And in this dream common predators lie down, at peace, with their usual prey. The killing has stopped. The wolf is living at peace with

the lamb. The leopard's violence towards the goat has ceased. The calf is safe from the lion, because these days the lion's taken up eating straw instead. In some reversal of the original curse from the Garden of Eden, even the serpent - whom we thought was doomed forever to strike at the heel of the human, is playing with the little child. The old order of one eating up the other, the old order of predator and prey (and all that means), is done. No hurting, no destroying. They all live together, now, in peace. *"Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven"*. That's the prayer.

Lest it remain only a prayer, what is to be done? The people don't quite know what's to be done, but they find themselves streaming, in huge numbers, out to the wilderness, where they confess their sins to John. To another prophet, someone captured by how the world might be, they find themselves saying "sorry" and longing for a better way. So he baptizes them with water, and assures them that the new reality is coming near. The dreamed-of better way is about to break. And then he delivers a special word for those within the crowd whom he suspects are not present to seek the better way. Within the crowd, John finds the Pharisees and Sadducees - people who have made a good religious living out of preying on the people. They have become rich through the offerings made in the temple. Later, Jesus will describe them as having piled heavy loads on the people and having never lifted a finger to help them. They are leaders who have eaten up the led - they are predators of the people. John's approach is to call them a brood of vipers, and to tell them that they must repent. The prayer remains just a prayer, the vision remains just a vision, if the predators don't repent. John's language, his use of images of fire and the felling of trees, suggests he's telling them this all pretty forcefully. He's yelling at the predators.

Will that work? Can you yell peace and justice into existence? Will predators fear the anger of a honey-eating hair-shirt? Probably not; so maybe we're stuck.

We are not stuck, because John is not the Messiah. He's merely trying to get the people ready. Out from the crowd, from the collage of humanity assembled in the wilderness, comes someone called Jesus.

Jesus isn't shouting. He's asking humbly to be baptized - an expression of solidarity with the people. A modelling of humanity saying "sorry". And once he's made that expression, he will go back to where the people live, the villages, towns and cities, and he will live among them - in a way that says "the kingdom is near; truly, God is among you, among **US**". Jesus is pursuing the vision simply by living it. Will it work? Or will he be crucified? Will peace come, or will one more good person simply become prey to the predators? Or, let's let ourselves dream a little - will some follower of his eventually be able to proclaim that death has been swallowed up in victory? [1 Cor. 15:54] Predation itself eaten up by the Jesus life?

As I said last week, Advent is a strange kind of season. It's a time for affirming that something significant and beautiful, something unique began with the cries of a child in Bethlehem. We affirm that God's new reign began, and in a strange way was complete already. It was being lived in reality, and death already was defeated. But again, in Advent we know it still is to come. More baptizing required. More repentance needed. John still needs to face off the predators - who continue to feed on the vulnerable. There's a lot to be done. But in wee pockets here and there, the Jesus life is lived - and where it *is* lived, lions lie down with lambs, and the cow and the bear graze together. Predators and prey are reconciled and peace prevails. The vision of the prophet finds form in the life of the people - and creation seems a little bit new.

They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain. On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples. Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. The Advent prayer is "Amen! Come, Lord Jesus".

We keep a moment of quiet.