

## Sermon Archive 292

Sunday 3 May, 2020

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: Psalm 119: 33-40  
1 Corinthians 13: 1-13

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



I'd heard on the grapevine that native birds were coming back into the city. With less traffic on the roads, and fewer people round about, our birds were growing more confident and coming in. Indeed, on my lockdown daily walk, I heard either a tui or a bellbird in the back garden of the house three houses down from my place. All excited by that, and keen to have them come and visit **my** garden, I put out into my garden and put a bowl of honey water there. The water almost immediately attracted a good number of bees. A friend commented that that was a good thing, since the birds and the bees often go well together (I guess hence the expression). Unfortunately, though, the bees were a little too enthusiastic, diving head-first into the bowl, getting stuck and drowning. It all became a bit of a graveyard. But, despite all that death and disaster, one morning, really, really close to my back garden, I think I heard native bird song really, really close. Maybe the bees had not died in vain! The birds were almost there. And then we moved from Level Four to Level Three. And the traffic noise grew a bit louder. And the foot traffic ramped up again. I don't know, because no bird ever told me - but I suspect the birds had said to one another "what's that noise", and went back to wherever it was that they used to stay. My Covid-19 given possibility of a native sanctuary in my garden just missed its moment. It didn't quite get there - and so for now I'm settling for sparrows and bowl of dead bees.

-ooOoo-

Nobody loves a virus. But a number of people, recently, have reflected on how our Virus might have given us an opportunity to think about living differently - living at a slower pace, treating the creation (and one another) in a gentler kind of way. It's wondered whether the enforced slowdown mightn't have given us time to consider whether we need to **rush** so much. Do we really **need** all those clothes, all that petrol, all that plastic? Or are we sensing, within the restrictions,

that another kind of world is calling out to us to be built - some kind of, as it were, garden sanctuary - full of birdsong and peace?

Good question.

Psalms 119 is an epic poem - it's got 176 verses - roughly half of which are celebrating God's laws and commandments, and roughly the other half of which are pleas from the psalmist that he might be able to live by those commandments. It's almost as if the psalmist has caught this vision of how the world could be, if we all lived in the right way, and longs to live in that way, but knows he's missing the opportunity to get it right. "I love your ways, O God; I just wish I could follow them". I can **see** the garden (in my mind, in my hope, in my imagination [in wherever it is that God plants vision]) - but I just haven't yet quite been able to enter it, to make it my home. It's like I can hear the birds singing, just over there; but they're not yet here.

Is this psalm the song of someone wanting to make a better world, but fearing that we're not quite going to make it? If it is, perhaps it's a timely text for us to ponder. From within this short section of the epic poem, there are three things to seek, and three things that are getting in the way.

The first thing to seek. The psalmist prays to learn the **way of God's statutes**. Not just the statutes, but the "way" of the statutes. Statutes may be rules and regulations - 'thou shalt', and 'thou shalt not'. Commandments, which could be numbered, if you wanted, from one to ten. They're things that could be treated as memory verses, rattled off like a Westminster Confession. But the **way** of the statutes is different - it's more like a direction to go in, a spirit in which to live. It's more about mood or orientation - - - not a list of things to be kept, but a path along which to journey (a spirit, a mood, a feel). Is it the kind of thing, that a thousand years later someone called Paul will put this way: If I have prophetic powers, and understand all . . . knowledge, and if I have faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing." The missing bit is the "love", the emotion, the way the heart sits within the life. The direction, the spirit. The "way" of the statute. In this garden that the psalmist would plant, and grow, and one day live in, one of his prayers is for a life of right direction.

The second thing for which the psalmist prays, is **understanding**. The world he feels is calling out for him to be built, is a world of understanding. And yes, it may be that the prayer is simply for understanding of God's law, but it's also only so that the psalmist can follow that law with "all his heart". Again, it's about heart knowledge - understanding with all the heart. If I understand your heart,

am I ever going to batter it? If you and I see each other, eye to eye, through the eye to where you are, and if I understand you, will we not live together more gently? Understanding. Understanding. Is this the kind of thing which a thousand years later someone called Paul will put this way: "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known." Understanding; whole-heart - truth.

The third thing for which the psalmist prays, is **life**. No need to preach this at length. We're just emerging from the mystery of Easter, where we saw what **death** meant, and what it tried to do, and how it functioned. But the new world of Easter casts all that out - for the sake of life - the giving of life - the victory of life. The new world calls out to be built - and it's an echo of Easter - the coming of life.

That's how the psalmist's prayers are shaped. The way, the truth, and the life. Will the birds make it as far as my garden? Will the sanctuary be established? Or will we stumble at the point of sparrows and a bowl of bees?

Well, there are hurdles - and these also are part of the psalmist's prayer. The psalmist says "turn my heart, O God, to your decrees, and not to selfish gain." There is, getting in the way of the new world, an inclination towards "selfish gain". I wonder if you heard this. While it's true, that some employers are returning wage subsidies back to the government, because the grants turned out to be more than they needed, other employers refused to pass the subsidies on to their employees, pocketing the money for themselves instead. The same circumstances that have led some of us to think about a better world, and a gentler way of living, led others to cheat and steal. The psalmist admits that "selfish gain" is getting in the way.

Secondly, "turn my eyes, O God" (sings the psalmist) "from looking at vanities". Vanities! There is, getting in the way of the new world, an inclination for human beings to be entertained by worthless vanities - that do not improve us. Nadia Lim uses her time of lock down to generate a cooking programme for those who need to eat well at a time when we can't buy yeast or flour. Someone else uses their lockdown time to write an article on whether Meghan Markle will be more unpopular than Wallis Simpson. Many stay at home, for the serious business of saving life. Other's feel like going for a surf, so go to the beach - it's a simple entertainment. Ashley Bloomfield explains complex things in clear, elucidating ways. Someone else suggests we should all be

injecting ourselves with disinfectant - and who captures the headlines? Is this something like what a thousand years later, someone called Paul would mean, when he said "when I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child"? I'm not sure - but I **AM** sure that vanities (things that are not worthy) are getting in the way of the better world. The same conditions within which some rise to new and hopeful heights, are also an incubator for the vanities. As we would plant, grow and move into the new world, vanities are getting in our way.

And the last thing the psalmist prays might not make us stumble is the disgrace which he dreads - the disgrace he dreads. None of us wants disgrace. Who wants disgrace? But the psalmist is living in dread of it - he's living in dread. Now, I am frightened of failing, so maybe I shouldn't try. He tried to attract native birds and ended up with a kamikaze bowl of bees! He thought something good could come out of a virus - but we went straight back to pollution and greed and lots of people died. To hope and believe, what an idiot! Hang your head in shame, you plonker!

Ah, this kind of thing, that kind of voice too, is getting in the way. Instead, though, you person of psalmic vision, hope! Instead, you person of psalmic vision, dream! Seek the better way, and plant that garden for birdsong. The psalmist longs to be rid of the things that get in the way, because he has sensed that the better world really is calling out to be built - built by people like us, in times like these. And if Easter means what we think it might mean, then maybe the better world isn't completely impossible. Maybe we, like the psalmist, having captured a vision worth following, a world worth building, a hope worth having, are going to make it.

-ooOoo-

I had heard on the grapevine that native birds were coming back into the city. With less traffic on the roads, and fewer people round about, birds were growing more confident. All excited, and keen to have them visit my garden, I put out some honey water. How's it going go? Coming out of Covid, let's build God's better world. And let's pray that we'll get there . . .

A moment of quiet.