

Sermon Archive 455

Sunday 15 October, 2023

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reflections for Animal Sunday

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Reading: Genesis 3: 8-15

Reflection: Blame the Snake

Well, I suppose it must be conceded that I've had a sufficient number of birthdays now for people to expect me to function properly in the world. Take the dirty dishes not simply to that part of the kitchen bench right next to the dishwasher, but to break through that often neglected but all sufficient last stretch to the rack inside the dishwasher itself. To pay the rates bill, and then to use what it pays for by putting the bins out on the night before early morning collection - with the right kind of rubbish in each differently coloured bin. To get my hair cut frequently enough to give the impression that I do occasionally take a look in the mirror to make sure I'm presenting as someone who's coping with life. None of these things are hugely onerous; they're just what we do here in the garden.

Some of us also have to care for the children - shepherd them from infancy to toddlerhood, then childhood to adolescence - maybe beyond. Good God! Imagine having the responsibility of forming another human being - sounds harder than stacking the dishwasher. Or the responsibility for being a friend - not a no-care acquaintance who only has easy words, but someone who cares enough to float an unwelcome word or carry the considerable weight of someone wounded in the fray. Much less the responsibility of caring for the planet! I wonder how many

birthdays have to fly by before you're ready to care for the planet! Sixty? I fear the answer may be "at least sixty-one". It's a tricky thing this "being responsible in the world".

One evening I heard a voice in the garden, and I recognised it. It was the same voice that when I'd been younger had said to me "here is the world and all that's in it - my beautiful, intricate, delicate world - take good care of it for me, won't you?" I'm not sure I'd had enough birthdays then to know what I was being asked! I may not have been listening properly. But I **can** tell you that when I heard the voice again. It wasn't like I'd forgotten to get a haircut. It was like I'd forgotten to get dressed. Kitchen bench cluttered, wheelie bins overflowing - children running wild and chimneys belching smoke into the air meant for next generation's breathing. It felt like a pig's ear.

And so I did what any responsible human being would do when feeling called to account. I blamed the woman. She, God bless her, wasn't going to wear that, so she herself passed on the buck. In something akin to "kicking the cat", she deflected the blame to another part of creation - a part of creation that was never called to exercise dominion, never called to responsibility - and equally important, a part of creation that has no voice as we have voices to defend ourselves with. We'll blame the snake. Just because, quite conveniently, it's there, under our dominion, and because it's less articulate than we are (although, boy we can spin a story, can't we, of the clever arguments it mounted about the virtues of apple-eating), we'll blame the snake. Indeed, this is the model: for our failed responsibility, we let the innocent, who have no voice, bear the blame and carry the consequences.

So, concerning that 50% of Aotearoa New Zealand's greenhouse gases that comes from agriculture, it's not our

fault. The fault lies with the gastric tract of the cow. What's the cow going to say? Concerning the increasing rarity of the Sumatran tiger, it's nothing to do with our conversion of its habitat into palm oil plantations; it's entirely the fault of the tigers being animals in places where animals ought not to be. The fault lies with the tiger. What's a tiger ever going to say? **Not** concerning animals, but certainly concerning those who have no voice, how about Australia decides to say "no" to giving a "voice in parliament" to its indigenous people. O, the classic trope is that a voice isn't necessary (is that an echo of the white Australia voice that withheld the right for Aborigines to vote in Australia until 1962?) And anyway, why give a responsible voice to people who drink too much and trash the council houses they're given. Blame is given to the voiceless, because you know, conveniently, what are the voiceless going to say (especially if we say "no" to the voice)?

In failing to be responsible in its husbandry of the world, the human being blames that other part of creation that cannot speak for itself. We blame the snake.

Reading: Luke 13: 34-35

Reflection: Mother Hen speaks

With something akin to exasperation, Jesus talks about the messy kitchen, the neglected, marauding children, the sense of humanity being found undressed and embarrassed. "O, Jerusalem", he weeps, "you've killed the prophets and stoned those from whom you might have learned! And how often! How often has it caused heaven tears! (Can heaven speak for itself? If heaven has tears, is it also to have a voice?)

He shares an image - and yes, an image from that part of creation that doesn't speak. A mother hen gathers her chicks under her wings. She makes of herself (her very self) a shelter for those for whom she, by the power of something so sure and deep it can only be called "instinct", cares. Looking for the shelter of God, that you may live the real life for which you have been created, consider the mother hen!

As he says this, not only do we receive the vision that we need to receive (so that we can care for Creation), the mother hen receives her voice. She speaks to us of who she is and how she nurtures, that we might be nurtured in faith and find "courage to be" who we most fully are.

It's a simple thing really. In calling us, as we struggle and sometimes fail to care for the world, to consider the mother hen, he gives to that voiceless part of creation, the capacity to speak - and to speak for our correction and nurturing. Don't "kick the cat". Listen to the mother hen. Don't blame creation. Be inspired by it to care for it better. "O, Jerusalem", he cries, "learn what you can, as creation finds its voice".

There it is - simple as a mother hen!

So, we bless the animals, give thanks to God, open our hearts and minds, and keep a moment of quiet.