

Sermon Archive 505

Sunday 20 October, 2024

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reflections for Animal Sunday

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Introduction: You don't exist

Kia ora, Canterbury Panther. While the British tourist, Nick Baggott, took a photo of something at Lake Tekapo in 2020, I know it wasn't of you - because you don't exist. Other people say they've seen you - one near the Halswell Quarry, one in Kaiapoi - a couple of tired farm hands on stations in the McKenzie basin. Every couple of years you are said to be seen - never in a way though that makes others believe.

One theory is that a ship travelling from America in 1915 stopped off in Lyttelton to off-load supplies. A container of animals set for a zoo in Australia was damaged, and you, or your great, great grandmother, full of babies escaped to the hills. It's said that some port people wanted no one to panic, so suppressed news of the escape. Others imagined that you'd die in the cold of the winter fairly soon, so wouldn't be a long-term problem. But then, ah ha! You started getting seen. At one point, one sighting caused a group of lion handlers from Orana Park to be dispatched with tranquiliser guns. They didn't find you, of course - returned to the park with all their darts intact - because you don't exist. I wonder why it appeals to us that you might - exist, that is. Is the child inside us entertained by the idea of your being, like she might be entertained by fairies, unicorns and trolls under the bridge? Is the world not quite magical enough without the possibility of you?

And how about you, taniwha? By British sensibility and world-view, you don't exist either. So, where do you come from? Is it from the same place from which the angels come? Or the cherubim and seraphim? Or the New Testament's spirits of the air? I wonder why we're much bolder to say that **you** don't exist, than we are to deny existence to **them**. You're Māori; they're Middle Eastern. And us? We're people who have a materialist language to describe all that needs describing. Happy are we, my taniwha friend, to throw you into the Canterbury Panther category and gloat over your non-existence. You don't exist, and maybe that's fine?

Hymn: How shall I sing that majesty?

First Lesson: Genesis 1: 1-5

Reflection: You did exist, but don't anymore

Kia ora, dinosaur - primordial, early, like from a time when the planet was new. Apologies to you if you're one of the quiet herbivorous ones, for publishing a photo of the Tyrannosaurus Rex, with all her teeth and carnivorous anger. To be honest, she's just more photogenically exciting than you. Not so interesting, you, plodding along and munching on giant leaves. We acknowledge that you were quite a family - some of whom flew, some of whom nibbled, some of whom killed. No lack of variety in your lot. And we acknowledge that you lived very much in your time - evolved perfectly in your conditions to be dominant, rulers of the planet. And then, one day you were gone. You existed once, but no longer do.

In the 1980s, they decided that your disappearance was caused by an asteroid the size of Mount Everest hitting the earth around the Yucatan Peninsular of Mexico, unleashing the power of a billion nuclear weapons. Everything in its flash zone died immediately. Earthquakes and tsunamis spread across the planet, as did showers of scorching hot rock from the asteroid and the bedrock it struck. As one New Zealand politician might have put it: "goodbye Freddie". You were successful in the practice of living on the planet. You were, to the sensibilities of a modern person, a fascinating creature to think about. One imagines a tiny plastic model of you would please a million children were to turn up in our breakfast cereal. I'm just pleased, as I note you once existed but now no longer do, that it was nothing to do with me! Your dinosaur blood is not on my hands.

Kia ora Moa - you amazing bird. Like the dinosaurs in their time, so you flourished in yours. Also like the dinosaurs, you came in wide varieties - the most exciting of which of course was your giant version. You were all over the place - in the forest, through the shrub-land, into the sub-alpine altitudes. People who study your skeleton wonder whether you might have spent most of your time with your head forward (for foraging), but it's understood that you also could rear up, giving you the thrilling "height excitement" the museums liked to feature. Why feature a slouch-postured bird when height is more public-pleasing! I never got to see you "live", of course. It seems that you were hunted into extinction within a couple of hundred years of my human predecessors here joining you in the land of the long white cloud. I choose not to admit any fault - since your demise

was at the hands of a people of a different culture. I'm sure I would have taken better care of you.

As for the huia - last sighting was in 1907, which was after my tribe arrived. It seems our dogs and cats (and weasels and stoats) dispatched you. We're moving, it seems, into a realm of responsibilities from which it's harder to run. On our watch it happened. Haere ra, huia, moe mai ra.

So dinosaurs, not our fault. Moa, kind of our fault. Huia, definitely our fault.

Second Lesson: Genesis 1: 20-25

Reflection: We hope you continue to exist

Here's how the categorisation works for how vulnerable a species is. You begin with

- least concern
- vulnerable
- endangered
- critically endangered
- extinct

In Aotearoa New Zealand, on our top ten our critically endangered list are five plants (plant lives matter too) and five animals. Because it's animal Sunday, the plants can wait. Here are the animals we're most likely soon to lose.

The Canterbury knobbed weevil. Thought extinct since 1924, it was rediscovered in 2004 by Laura Young, inhabiting golden spear-grass in Burkes Pass. It is now restricted to just one small area, with a total population of less than 100 adults. It's a weevil. Do we care?

The Mokohinau stag beetle is one of New Zealand's few remaining large beetles. Known only from the Mokohinau Islands east of Auckland, it has disappeared from all islands in the area inhabited by rats. The last known population inhabits a living room-sized patch of ice-plant on a small, rat-free rock stack in the island group which is highly vulnerable to storm damage. It's a beetle. Do we care?

The NZ fairy tern has about a dozen pairs surviving on beaches between Whangarei and Auckland. Beach narrowing, mainly due to housing

developments and weed invasion, forces the terns to nest closer to the sea, putting their eggs at risk during storms. Does this matter?

The Chesterfield skink wasn't discovered until 1994 between Hokitika and Greymouth. Their numbers have decreased so much that few animals have been seen in the last five years, and a number of surveys have failed to find it elsewhere. Does this matter?

*The Māui dolphin is a sub-species closely related to the Hector's dolphin, and is now found only in the shallow coastal waters off the west coast of the North Island. Only between 55 to 63 Māui dolphins remain. Entanglement in fishing nets and debris, mining activity, boat strike, pollution and disease, continue to pose real risks. I think this might be **our** fault.*

First reflection - you never existed, so it really doesn't matter. Second reflection - you did exist, and now you don't, but much of that isn't our fault. Third reflection - you do still exist; the challenge to us is to work out whether that matters to us. You are vulnerable; do we care?

There are ecologists who insist that the integrity of the whole ecosystem depends on the survival of animals we don't greatly notice or value. They suggest that all life on earth is vital, and to be respected, protected - for the good of all, and for their own inherent value. Considering our indifference to extinction, they coin the term "speciesist".

But for us, who worship God, let's harken back to that reading we heard: that at the creation of the animals, God observed that their creation was good. Can we be indifferent to the nurturing of what is good? Can we ignore our great power to destroy, and perhaps our greater power to love? That might be material for our prayers.

For now, we sing of our desire to touch the earth lightly.

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