

Sermon Archive 553

Sunday 14 September, 2025

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reflections on the Octopus

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Lesson: Psalm 139: 13-17

Reflection: Paul in a pot

*For it was you who formed my inward parts;
My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written
all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed.*

The people who gave me the recipe ran a fairly elegant kitchen at their place. European pots and pans, a pantry full of special ingredients which when named would make me sagely nod as if I knew what they were - but didn't! They were kind of my cuisine sophistication tutors. In the cast iron Le Creuset casserole, make a bed of herbs - bay leaves, parsley, garlic, black peppercorns and lemon. Onto the bed, for a low and slow heating place half a kilo of baby octopuses. As a child, if I'd been presented with anything that had tentacles and a big bulbous head, I'd have said "you've got to be joking" - but here I'm being sophisticated. It's very French, or very Greek, or very something.

Because it's my first time with this recipe, I'm kind of studying things carefully as I go - keeping a closer eye on how things are looking. I notice that the octopuses are a distinguished dark shade of grey. Two or three centimetres in length, almost alien-like, they make a strange assembly on their bed of herbs. Indeed, yes, they do have suckers on their tentacles, which I will discover gives them an interesting texture as I swallow them down. But that's for later.

In the kitchen, presiding over this low and slow, I have plenty of time for my mind to wander. Do you remember Paul? He was German, I think, and the world found he had this uncanny ability to move around his tank, check out a couple of flags that had been put in there, and alight on the flag of the team that would win the next round of the FIFA World Cup. Paul made the bookies nervous, and the punters happy, because he seemed, in his octopus instinct to pick the winners.

Silly really; how's an octopus to read the form of a football team? It makes no sense - and maybe that's why we human beings love it - a story that makes no sense about an octopus who can tell the future.

Out of the Twilight Zone to and fro about "special powers", some marine scientists **did** point out that the octopus is actually a very intelligent animal. It can't pick football winners, of course, because the even more intelligent human creature can't pick football winners. But never dismiss the octopus as being anything like a brainless jellyfish. Octopuses are of a whole different order.

*O God, it was you who formed my inward parts,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
I am fearfully and wonderfully made.*

Into the pot you go!

-ooOoo-

In 2022, the University of Auckland applied for government funding to research matters related to the commercial farming of octopuses. In their application, they noted that: "New Zealand could become a world leader in octopus farming, earning an estimated \$100m within a decade. [They] described octopus aquaculture as a low emission means of producing "high quality animal protein that is highly prized in international markets". The university said, if successful, this would help reach a government aquaculture target of \$3 billion annual revenue by 2035.

The university was granted funding. In May of 2025, when it applied for an extension of the funding, other people joined the conversation. One was Dr Kat Bolstad, from Auckland University of Technology (over the road from Auckland University - maybe competing for research funding). Dr Bolstad noted that "Octopus[es] are known to be problem solvers, who can use tools and recognise individuals. They also have a reputation as escape artists and are able to squeeze through any gap their beak can fit through. New Zealand's own Inky the Octopus made international headlines after he fled the Napier aquarium when his tank lid was left ajar. He made his way across the floor and escaped to the sea through a 150mm drain pipe."

Octopuses are intelligent, so ought not to be farmed. So she said. Had I heard her saying that I would never again have followed my recipe for baby octopus. As it happened, I only made the recipe once. Once was enough, since it didn't taste all that nice.

So that's my official line just now. I'm not eating octopus, because octopuses are more intelligent than I understood.

Paul, and Inky say:

*"O God, it was you who formed my inward parts,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
I am fearfully and wonderfully made."*

We put that one to bed.

Hymn: Thou art before me Lord, thou art behind

Reflection: Enlightenment blindness

I have stopped eating octopus because octopuses are intelligent. Isn't that a good thing?

Well, my friend, Tony the Buddhist, sidles up to me. He says "well done Matthew, for no longer killing the octopus. But I don't understand your reasoning. You're respecting the octopus for its intelligence. You are according it a "right to life" because it's clever. We, your Buddhist friends, are caring for the octopus, not because it is intelligent, but because it is a sentient being.

[Sentience: the ability to experience feelings and sensations - the ability to experience pain and pleasure - happiness and suffering.]. Sentience.

You Christians are a funny lot. I reckon it's something to do with the way that you felt you were in charge of the culture of a continent that suddenly had a Renaissance and an Enlightenment to deal with. Suddenly you emerged from your Dark Ages superstition, while your astronomers were re-jigging the skies, and your chemists were discovering more than earth, water, wind and fire. Now you had hydrogen and carbon and stuff! You fell into thinking that what made you special (and indeed what reflected your divine image) was that you **reasoned**. The Age of Reason. As Westerners, as creatures of the Enlightenment, you're admiring the octopus because it's intelligent. But as Christians, I can't help but feel you ought to have another key.

Otherwise, if you follow your logic of according value principally in response to intelligence, you ought not to value those of your children who are not intelligent. They ought to be worth less than the clever ones. Could you call that "Christian"? I know that your Hitler was happy to execute the intellectually challenged - but really? Surely **sentience** is a better starting point." So says Tony the Buddhist.

Don't you just hate it when Buddhism makes a pertinent point?

Well, searching for a more explicitly Christian (rather than Western) key, we go to a reading from Paul's letter to the Corinthians (no, Paul the apostle, not the octopus). Chapter 13.

Lesson: 1 Corinthians 13: 1-13

Reflection: The more important thing

It was in the early 1980s that I fell into the Bible Class movement of the local Presbyterian church. If God sent angels to guard the vulnerable, then I reckon our evening meetings would have had so many angels the air that it would have been impossible to breathe. I reckon pretty much everyone there had something they were dealing with (had they had the honesty to articulate it). Pretty much every day some kind of charismatic experience found someone. This **was**, I guess, a time following on from the eruption of the Charismatic movement of the 1970s. For a long time, I was left untouched by the movement - and everyone knew why. It was because I was at university, studying philosophy. I **thought** too much. My learning was getting in the way. I lacked the gay abandon (ha) of the humble spirit. For all its warmth and welcome, the community in which I found myself was anti-intellectual. In response to that, these days I think I would have to say "I can't help it; I guess I was just born that way". And truly, all these years after, I don't think that we here, anyway, are being called to despise our brains.

But back to Tony, the Buddhist, by whose encouragement we have listened again to the words of Paul, apostle, not octopus. Paul says that knowledge is a gift from God. It's wonderful; but it one day will come to an end. Greater than knowledge, more enduring than knowledge (and indeed than prophecies and tongues as well) are faith, hope and love. And the greatest of these three - is love.

Enlightenment intelligence, or Buddhist sentience? How about Christian faith, hope and love - the greatest of which is love . . ?

What are people of Christian faith to value in other forms of life? What are people of Christian faith to nurture within their communities? What are we to wonder when the octopus seems to whisper "I am fearfully and wonderfully made"? What makes any living thing special? Is the key to this to be found in the realm of love?

We keep a moment of quiet.

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