

Sermon Archive 554

Sunday 21 September, 2025

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Blessing of the Animals

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Lesson: Jeremiah 32: 1-15

Reflection: Bad financial decision!

Accountants are bound by certain professional standards, and a degree of desk-side manner no doubt is recommended. They will, though, like doctors with their bedside manner, and like teachers with their classroom style, vary in the way they advise their clients. I'm not sure whether Jeremiah's accountant was the sort to say "Sir, do you think that's wise?" or the sort to say "have you gone mad?" Most certainly, whatever the style, I think the accountant would have felt constrained to point out it made little financial sense to purchase an expensive piece of land just before it became worthless.

Note the context. The land lies within a region, on the very edge of which assembles this great military force, poised to pounce. It's a matter of almost no time at all before the land becomes pocked with bomb craters, starved of its social services, likely to become almost completely uninhabitable. In all likelihood, tomorrow its owners will walk away - or run away screaming, depending on how big the bombs are. By next week you could probably either buy it for pittance, or just walk onto it and declare it yours - if in fact you want a devastated patch of sorrow. Given how long land takes to recover from this kind of thing, you'd really be better to buy somewhere else entirely.

But here is the accountant's client declaring he wants to purchase the land, right here and right now - an act of financial folly, if not financial suicide. "Sir, do you think that's wise? Sir, you've got to be joking!"

Jeremiah insists. He buys the field, gets everyone to witness what he's doing. He makes sure the record of his having done so is kept secure, so that future generations can see what he did. And he says he does it as a sign - a sign of God's confidence in the future of this place. Thus says the Lord: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land."

This place has a future.

The scholars call this kind of thing a "prophetic action". It's something unusual that the prophet of God does, in the sight of the people, to make a point - generally about values, or faith, or hope - sometimes judgment. They're deeds that make no political or financial sense, but make perfect sense if you're motivated by a principle that comes from somewhere else. It's not about the money. It comes from somewhere else.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, some people look animals in the eye, and make sensible financial decisions. Consider the farmers. A while back, right across Canterbury, many farmers read the market on wool, then read the market on milk and beef. All around the region, sheep disappeared and cattle replaced them. On the remaining sheep farming projects, sensible decisions were made concerning the size of various flocks. More intensive husbandry practices and various genetic drafting programmes yielded less wool, but better wool. The less genetically refined animals were thanked and discharged. In some instances the land they would have occupied was given over to new-fangled things that made the neighbours wonder - the Drysdals of Balfour planted hemp ("isn't that something illegal used by hippies", the neighbours said.)

Animals on farms are managed very much as a rational resource, and sound financial principles guide the humans in their decision making. The accountants have no reason to ask "Sir, madam, do you think that is wise?" because the financial return is obvious. The farming industry keeps our population fed, and earns us \$59.9 billion in exports every year. That accounts for between 5 and 6% of our Gross Domestic Product. Thank you farmers. Thank you grains. Thank you animals. The accountants (and the accountants within us) approve!

Down at the other end of the "is that wise" scale, we find a cat I shall call "James Dean". James Dean is a beautiful boy, owned by a friend of mine. Twice last year, James came home with injuries that suggested he'd been fighting. A wound to his tail (necessitating expensive ointment from the vet), and then a wound to his nose (also necessitating expensive ointment from the vet). When will he save us some dollars by learning not to fight! Well, earlier this year James proved insufficiently nimble to avoid the car. A broken jaw required surgery (including anaesthesia) and lengthy post-operative care. A final indignity involved photos of his shaven face being posted on facebook. Poor love! In a household where money isn't growing on trees, the case of Mr Dean raised the accountancy question, "Madam,

do you think that's wise?" When the numbers don't add up, where fixing the cat makes no more sense than buying a field in a war-torn neighbourhood, the sensible among us ask the question: what's going on here?

Is it the doing of a prophetic action? Some attention attracting deed designed to make us think about values, faith, hope, judgment? Is it James' owner wanting to get us thinking about God's view on the way we run the world? Floating the idea of how we ought to value things we've forgotten to value?

I suppose you could argue that. And maybe as the human being seeks care for the cat, throwing financial concerns to the wind, we are given something to think about. But I suspect, as my friend seeks treatment for her cat, it's not about a public announcement. She throws her money away, not so much because she has anything to say to us. She does it, because this animal is one she loves.

Knox Singers

Lesson: John 15: 12-17

Reflection: The slow creeping of love

Three years before we find him praying his farewell prayer, and talking to his disciples, Jesus had a job to do. He'd declared his mission to be an expression of what Isaiah had described. *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."*

That's what Jesus had set out to do. In order to advance this, he'd called a group to follow him, to join him in "the work". He'd not appeared to have called them with any overt strategy obvious. They were an ordinary selection of souls (except perhaps for Judas, who came with financial acumen). At the start of the journey, they were tools in his work belt, labourers with available hands, hired-help that unimpressively made sense. Sir, do you think it's wise? **Yes**, we **can** see they'll have their slightly mechanical value. We're not making money, but we're getting the job done. And these guys come free, so there's no cost against the hiring. Good job!

Three years later, as he speaks with them, he says "no longer do I call you servants. Now I call you friends."

There has been something going on in the last three years that has changed Jesus' view of who they are. No longer does he evaluate them solely on the basis of how useful they are, how much sense they make within the machine of the work that needs to be done. Now they are his friends, people for whom he deeply cares.

Again, we might ask "Sir, do you think that's wise?" You know, forming attachments, close sympathies for people who began as work units! This could very well break your heart. Should you not have been more careful to focus on the task - to continue to assess these living things on the simple basis of the work they do?

Jesus might reply something along the lines of it was always bound to happen this way - since he's been created in the image of love, and we know we don't live by bread alone. We are formed for love. We express love. We seek love. Indeed, it may not be wise - buying our territory (our place to stand - our *turangawaewae*) in the perilous cratered field of love. But that's what we do, because that's who we are: creatures bearing the image of the God of love.

By many criteria, my friend ought to have euthanized James Dean. She could have bought a new one for much less than fixing the old one.

The presence in our lives of animals that do not make money, indeed that cost us money, says something about who we are, and how almost without thought, we seek room to express our better selves. Perhaps our love for our pets *is* a prophetic action. It speaks of where we're from, who we are, how love is central in the world we believe we belong to (God's world). Jeremiah buys a field, and someone rescues a cat. True to who we are, we do our deeds of love.

On this day of giving thanks for the animals, we keep a moment of quiet.

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