

Sermon Archive 604

Sunday 20 September, 2026

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reflection for Blessing of the Animals

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



A Reflection: Simon and Chuck

I'm a bit patchy on the timeline details (and so is my mother, whom I did ring about this), whether or not this happened before or after the birth of my sister (two and a half years younger than I am). Since, had my sister been a boy, she probably would have been called "Simon", we suspect this story happened shortly after the last Jack was born. My grandmother determined that the Jacks needed a pet, so arrived at our place with a cage containing a light blue budgie. Since it was a boy, needing a name, and since Susan hadn't claimed "Simon", the budgie was called Simon. A wee hook was engineered to hang Simon's cage in the window of our dining / family room -with nice views of the country out the back of the house over which Simon never would fly.

Down the road, in Botany Road, another part of the family had a green budgie called Bobby who, very much in keeping with the running of that household, had English lessons, and diligently learned a vocab of useful phrases like "hello", "who's a pretty boy then", "Bobby want a cracker". Without any such structured learning in his life, Simon just screeched loudly and filled the place with noise - much like the humans in the same living space. Simon liked bird seed, fronds of millet, cuttlefish, pieces of apple. He enjoyed throwing seed husks out of his cage into the human's living area below. At night we covered his cage in a cloth - and sometimes he pecked holes in that. His life was certainly not full of adventure, but he was part of the life of the dining room.

I was probably about twelve or thirteen years old, when my father woke me up one morning, told me to come with him for some sad news. He took me out to the wash house, to where Simon's cage had been taken. Dad wanted to break the news to me, gently, that my friend Simon had

died. I don't remember feeling deep sadness for Simon - but I do remember feeling the force of the fact that my father wanted to shepherd me through something he thought would upset me. It was sort of more about my father and me, than it was about Simon. A father cared for his son. Tending to the death of the animal brought that tenderly to the surface.

We replaced Simon's small cage with a bigger one, with room for two captives - who though living a similarly restrictive life, at least did it together.

Some years later, a cat turned up at our back door. He had so much more freedom than a caged bird. He came and went as he wanted. Something had gone wrong with that freedom, though, since when he turned up at our place, he was obviously lost. Freedom can do that. Now, having budgies in our house, my father (whose love for animals is well recorded) decided that a cat was not a good idea. He sort of encouraged the cat down the stairs, back into the garden - an action Dad's children cruelly described as "chucking" the cat down the stairs. It was nothing that cruel. But anyway, after a few days, we began to call the cat "Chuck". Chuck wasn't well, and we decided that we needed to do two things: place notices on public notice boards about a missing cat now found. And we needed to take him to the vet. Noting that Chuck wasn't ours, the vet decided not to charge us for the pills he prescribed. "Just put the pills into his dinner", was the advice. So, we (who by that time hadn't fed him anything) started giving him dinner, and that was that. We had a cat. He seemed to understand that budgies were a prohibited substance, so the story doesn't end in flying feathers. The story ends with me, now twenty seven years old, hearing in far off Germany, that Mum and Dad were now without a cat. He'd fallen asleep in the sun shine in the garden. I remember feeling so very far away from home - lost, like a lost cat, needing a home.

For a long time, while living in rental properties, I've been prohibited from having a pet. I'm not sure I'd have a caged one again - and landlords tend not to welcome free-ranging ones. Now I'm in my own home, I can't hide behind a landlord's prohibition. These days I just say "well, I live alone, and have to go to work, so I'm not in the right position to care for an animal". And I do say that - and do really believe

that. I suspect that once I've retired, nothing much will change, and the world will learn that Matthew just doesn't have whatever it takes to care for an animal. Nevertheless, every day God puts birds in my trees, blackbirds to splash in the bird bath. They have no cage, but come to share my garden. A dog barks at me outside Oderings - making my heart leap. Once a year, I get to invite a community to say "thank you for each animal coming to visit us."

The animals. Around them we learn the art of caring, and loving, and losing - and that's probably easier in community (with grandmothers and fathers and vets and brothers and sisters and friends). Animals also, though, teach us something about the limits of our love.

Hmmm. Here's a reading about the human being - how it's not good for her or him to be alone.

Lesson: Genesis 2: 15-23

A Reflection: God's company

Beholding this wonderful, newly conceived human creature (just think of what heights it might reach), God delights! God also immediately, though, realises that things won't go well for the human being if it's without company. This is a creature for whom company is as important as existence, water and air. Without company, this creature will, if not die, then at least wither, or do angry, destructive things. So what's a God to do?

The God's first (so most obvious) strategy is to make animals. Maybe the budgie will sing in the human's ears. Maybe the cat will climb onto the human's lap. Maybe the dog will declare best friendship - all good and helpful social offerings.

And so God makes all manner of animals, to provide the company, and brings them (is it two by two - no that's another animal story) to the human being to be named. Hey, let's call the budgie "Simon" and the cat "Chuck". How about Dougal the dog, Ermintrude the cow, Brian the snail, and some trans-categorical creature that goes "boing". God's creativity pours into diversity, in the attempt to find a helper, a partner for the human being who needs company.

God's **first** idea seems to be that the diversity of creation (the provision of the animals to be received, named, declared particular) is the key to the flourishing of the human.

God turns out to be a particularly perceptive analyst of how the company is going. While there is something delightful in watching the human receive the animals, name them, treasure them, it's not quite fitting the bill of a perfect partner. A new idea is had - that from the rib of the human, another human shall be created - causing the human being to say "behold, at long last, bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh - my proper partner". In this narrative, the human needs the human.

But let's never forget God's first thought - that the animal kingdom would provide a helper for the being who lives on company. Perhaps, indeed, there are things about the animal that **does** provide help to the company-seeking human creature. Maybe the animals are less critical in their love. Maybe they are more constant in their loyalties. Maybe they are more honest in their expression of emotion. I don't know - do you? I think we do know, though, that animals are a gift from God, and therefore to be held with respect, love and carefulness.

On this last Sunday in the Season of Creation, maybe it's a simple task of remembering the animals who have been part of our lives - of loving and being loved. Maybe we remember things like names, and welcoming, and losing, and feeling lost. Maybe we remember that the animals were God's first idea, when it came to making us not alone. Maybe we simply say "thank you, God, for Simon and Chuck" and all the others . . .

We keep a moment of quiet.

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