

St. Chad's Huapai

Season of Creation

Sunday, September 29th, 2019

Psalm 148 / Revelation 5:11-14 / Matthew 6:25-29

Sermon: Rod Oram

In the name of God the Creator, Christ the Cosmic One, and the Holy Spirit the Sustainer. Amen.

When we bless dogs and cats at services like this one in the name of St Francis, their patron saint, I feel at one with them...particularly the dogs.

Probably because I was a dog in an earlier life. Of this I have been certain since I was 3 years old...when I was put to bed in a large dog basket every time we visited by maternal grandparents.

Granny and Grandad Hammond ran the South Devon and Cornwall Institute for the Blind in Plymouth, in southwest England. Back in those days they really were institutions...where blind people lived and worked. The women and men caned chairs, and wove willow reeds into ship's fenders, laundry hampers...and dog baskets.

I so loved that big basket, I refused to step in and out of it like a human. I insisted on crawling on all fours in and out, like a dog...barking joyfully as I did. I do have more stories about me and dogs...but better to ask me over morning tea.

For many of us, dogs are easy to relate to...though, I do feel very sorry for people who are indifferent to them, or worse, are frightened by them.

Indeed, dogs were the first wild animals to be domesticated. In their case, to help humans hunt other animals for food. It quickly became a very symbiotic relationship. The earliest archaeological site of a man being buried with his dog is near Bonn in Germany. It is 14,500 years old.

A vast variety of animals and other life forms is God's great physical gift to us on this planet...which as far as we know, is the only lump of rock in the even vaster cosmos that she has so blessed.

But compared to dogs, it is so much harder to care about many of those other animals and life forms, let alone to love them.

Yet, a few people seem to have an infinite capacity to do so. I learnt this some decades ago at another Blessing of the Animals Service.

It was at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in Manhattan. Lynn and I were living in New York at the time but we hadn't gone to the service. Reading about it the next morning in the *New York Times*, we wished we had.

The reporter dwelled at length on one man and his glass jar. The man held it reverently in front of him as he processed up the cathedral's long central aisle for it to be blessed.

The jar's murky water seemed to host no life. When asked by the Dean what was inside deserving of blessing, he replied: "Amoeba".

The amusement of congregation and writer rang out in the news story. Indeed, we humans, the most complex life form in God's creation, are always careless and dismissive of the simplest.

Far worse, we are massively destructive of all forms of life in our ecosystems -- and increasingly so as our population, appetites and technology soar. Yet we utterly depend on these ecosystems for all we need for our lives. They are literally our life support system.

This is the Anthropocene, the first geological era in which the dominant force shaping the life systems of the planet is humankind itself.

Such is the havoc we wreak the rate of species extinction is more than 100 times the natural rate and accelerating fast. Some 50% of the species alive today will be extinct by 2100, scientists estimate.

That seems far away. Yet the youngest members of our congregation today could well be alive then.

We're creating just as much damage here in New Zealand, as Environment Aotearoa 2019 reports. This study is from the Ministry of Environment, and I encourage you to look it up online. It does a terrific job of laying out all our environmental challenges in urban, rural and wild New Zealand. An excellent summary is at <https://www.mfe.govt.nz/environment-aotearoa-2019-summary>

We know the conservation status of only 10,667 native species, which is only a tiny fraction of the total number of species thought to exist in our land, freshwater, and marine environments.

Of those ten and a half thousand, 3,747—one third -- of our native species are either at risk or threatened with extinction. For example:

- 76 percent of our native freshwater fish were either threatened with or at risk of extinction.

- More than 25 percent of native freshwater invertebrates had a threatened or at risk conservation status in 2013.
- Almost 33 percent of the plant species that depend on fresh water are classified as threatened or at risk.
- 80 percent of bats, 84 percent of reptiles, 74 percent of terrestrial birds, and 75 percent of frogs are currently threatened with or at risk of extinction.
- Of land plants, 46 percent of vascular plants, 23 percent of mosses, hornworts, and liverworts, and 10 percent of lichens are threatened with or at risk of extinction.
- Of our marine species, 90 percent of seabirds, 80 percent of shorebirds, and 26 percent of native marine mammals are either threatened with or at risk of extinction.
- When it comes to whole ecosystems, for a small country we have a very diverse range of unique ones. Some are naturally rare while others are uncommon internationally. The braided rivers in Canterbury and Otago are one example.
- Almost two-thirds of our rare ecosystems are threatened with collapse. The rate is higher for rare coastal ecosystems (like coastal turfs and shingle beaches), where more than three-quarters are threatened.

With each species we kill, even with each species we drastically reduce, we snip more threads in the web of life, weakening the ecosystem...and its ability to support us.

This, then, is the planet's Sixth Great Extinction. The previous five over the past 500m years or so were caused by natural phenomena, such as asteroids hitting the Earth, or massive volcanic eruptions.

Since the previous extinction about 30m years ago, it took eons for new life forms to evolve. Finally, and very late in the piece, we humans arrived -- only to cause the next great extinction.

We humans have long exploited nature.

"The world has been created for everyone's use, but you few rich are trying to keep it for yourselves. For not merely the possession of the earth, but the very sky, the air, and the sea are claimed for the use of the rich few. ...The earth belongs to all, not just to the rich." So wrote St Ambrose of Milan...in the 4th century.

Lynn White, the US historian and theologian, argued in the 1960s that Western Christianity bears responsibility for the current ecological crisis.

Because we believe God created the Earth for our benefit, we seek to exploit and dominate nature, thereby destroying it. Ours is the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen, he reckoned.

Yes, we need more science and technology to help us change our ways and for us to help nature restore itself. But that is not the full answer to this ecological crisis. White argued that since the roots of the crisis are largely religious, the “remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not”.

To set right what we have done wrong to God’s creation, we must do a fearsomely large number of things – above all we must stop abusing nature so we give nature a chance to heal itself.

But in essence, we only have to do one thing: Find our right relationship with nature. We can learn, for example, from the Maori understanding of *kaitiakitanga*.

We translate the concept inadequately into English. We use words like guardianship or custody. But those get us no further than the traditional Christian view of stewardship...the one I held as a child six decades ago and only in recent years have begun to shed.

Yet Maori understand that when we use resources, we influence the rest of the ecosystem, the web of life. Thus, we humans are inherently *part* of the system, part of nature. We are ourselves *kaitiaki*.

In Christianity, it was St Francis who discovered that creation was not flawed and broken, but was enriched with life. By engaging with creation Francis rediscovered the presence of the divine life in all things. He responded to that experience by affirming the innate goodness of creation.

What, though, might we make of the Gospel reading this morning? Particularly of its language redolent of St Francis?

Jesus seems to be saying don’t get swept up in competitive consumerism. Don’t worry, be happy. Quite right too.

But for many of us today, our greatest fear is not the unaffordability of the latest iPhone but the fate of the Earth itself. The seeming inevitability of drastic climate change, ecosystem destruction and species extinction desponds and paralyses us.

But Jesus, though, gives us a far more important message: a sense of awe and wonder about the sheer abundance and vast complexity of God’s creation. It will provide all we need if we listen to what it needs...what it is asking us to do to help it make itself healthy again.

But we won't hear this immense song of creation or see its marvels until we turn our backs on our arrogant belief that we know better than nature, that we can control and exploit it with impunity.

So, how might we rebuild such a right relationship with God's creation?

How will we let the ecosystem recover so God's creation can care better for us?

After all, the word ecosystem comes from the ancient Greek word *oikos*, meaning home.

This is very difficult, as our current day Francis, the Pope, expressed so deeply and eloquently in his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si', Praise Be: On Care for Our Common Home*. http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

In it, he strikes fearlessly at the heart of our spiritual and moral weaknesses, the failures of our economic and political systems and the corruption of our consumer culture. Driven by them, we are causing wanton destruction. This is just one of the excellent study guides to the encyclical <https://www.catholic.org.au/commission-documents/bishops-commission-for-justice-ecology-and-development/laudato-si/1711-encyclical-summary/file>

But given spirituality these days is largely lost to people and society, it's hard to be hopeful enough people will respond, whether they are poor and helpless, or rich and powerful.

Yet, if ours and the other great faiths of the world could rekindle a profound spiritual connection between people and creation through theology, liturgy, and service in the community...and a sense of wonder and mystery of God's limitless, unfathomable creation...then perhaps we humans would give creation a chance to heal itself.

These are just the sorts of sparks Katharine Jefferts Schori, then the Presiding Bishop of the US Episcopal Church, described on All Saints Day 2006 in Washington National Cathedral.

"Let the pain of the world seize us by the throat.
Listen for Jesus calling us all out of
our tombs of despair and apathy.
May the shock of baptismal dying once more set us afire.
This place we call home is meant to be
a new heaven, a new earth, a holy city, a new Jerusalem.
It is the sparks in the stubble that will make it so."

Amen

