

Connected to creatures in life and care

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 11 September 2016

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Creation 2C 2016 – Fauna Sunday

Psalm 104:14-23, 31; Luke 12:22-31: Contemporary Reading:

excerpt from Henry Beston *The Outermost House*

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under “Sunday Reflections” tab

So it's Fauna Sunday. Human beings have a complicated relationship with fauna. On Friday night, here at Pitt St, Irish theologian Pete Rollins joked about Australia's animals which, as he said, have evolved to be some of the most deadly on earth. Clare has a sister in law, who at 60 has just made her first visit to Australia because her daughter now lives on the Gold Coast. But, for most of Nan's life, she swore she'd never come here because of the snakes and spiders.

I have a thing about possums. New Zealanders are brought up to hate possums because they are destroying the ecosystems of indigenous bird life in Aotearoa. The first night I saw one looking in our bedroom window, right at us, in our house in Glebe, I slightly freaked out. Humungous flying cockroaches also give me the willies. I can now admire a huntsman spider as long as it stays outside.

When I last prepared a service for Fauna Sunday I was living in New Zealand where there are no native mammals. My power point featured birds, insects, fish and a lizard. Australian has fauna that is so much more diverse, and so much more freaky!

These four weeks in September are a season for theological reflection. It's not the season of the environment. It's the season of creation, because we are reflecting on the meaning we give to the environment and our responses to that reflection.

Often the messages that we get about our relationship to the environment are very depressing, reminding us of the damage that we have done. We need to know these things, but it is my feeling that if we are going to change how we live, we need to recapture a spirituality of creation. Awe and wonder and reverence, rather than admonition, have the power to bring about change.

This is season is one of those times when we come to understand that Christian faith is about more than social justice.

When we consider fauna, issues of justice do arise, ecological justice. We are called to eco-justice, justice for the Earth, its forms and its vegetation and its creatures.

We ask ourselves:

How do we live in right relation with birds, insects, reptiles and animals?

How do we embrace our kin in creation as our extended family?

How do we name the damage we have done to creation and empathise with its pain and brokenness?

How can we embark on a mission to be partners in the healing of creation?

Today after church we will be holding our Annual Congregational Meeting and then sharing a vegetarian lunch. The decision to have a meatless meal was made at the invitation of the Pitt Street EarthWeb Team – and the lunch is being provided by the Inner West Neighbourhood Group.

Some of our community are vegetarian. The majority of us, like me, are not. So I struggle with the ethics of meat in the context of fauna Sunday. If we regarded animals as kin, would we kill and consume them? The wild, wonderful creatures are not the only forms of fauna. Fauna includes sheep, cattle, chickens and even kangaroos that are farmed for food.

While I have not taken the step to be vegetarian, I have become convinced that omnivores have a responsibility to think about sustainability and about the ethics of animal care. We can all refuse to purchase meat that has been cruelly farmed and killed. We can choose to eat only animals that have led a good life and been slaughtered humanely. We can choose to eat meat less often, and that is something that our household has done over the past year.

How would attentiveness to what we eat affect our relationship with all creatures and with the sacred source of life?

I went through a phase when I thought that saying grace before meals was pious clap trap. I now think it is a practice worth reviving – especially for meat eaters if it includes giving thanks for the life of the creatures who sustain us; and being aware of their connectedness to the whole of creation.

Celebrating our kinship with the environment and especially with the flora and fauna of our particular ecosystem in Australia is important work in the practice of Christian life. As is attending to the crisis facing wild fauna.

There is a difference between celebrating fauna and romanticising nature. We are called to address the crisis facing Earth's creatures.

Numerous species in the wild are now endangered by the destruction of habitat in regions that have been cleared. Creatures in the wild are being poisoned or destroyed by the work of human beings.

Mercury poisoning is one of the worst culprits and coal burning power plants are a primary source of atmospheric mercury. When mercury washes into waterways or falls into oceans, bacteria transform it into highly toxic substances that affect many species as it moves up the food chain. Now scientists are finding mercury where they did not expect to find it—in songbirds from the wild that feed on contaminated insects.

Mercury is only one of the toxins destroying creatures of the wild. In India, tigers in the mountains have drastically decreased, not because of hunting but from the pesticides sprayed on hillside crops that flow into the streams where tigers drink.

As Andrew has made us aware each week, the practices of poaching and game hunting take the lives of species that are on the edge of extinction.

The biblical tradition has been used to deny our responsibility for creation. We are all familiar with the verses that have been used to justify domination and exploitation. But there are also alternative readings of tradition that are life-giving for us and our planet. These we now claim.

The *Season of Creation* website has some imaginative and inspiring reflections on the verses we heard read from Psalm 104.

In the Psalm we hear that God not only nurtures and sustains all the creatures of the wild, but also joins with them and with us in celebration. This section of the Psalm emphasises that the domains of the wild are under God's care. Our forbearers in faith believed that God provides the food, the habitat and the seasons needed for the wild to thrive and enjoy life.

Psalm 104 adds another element to the mystery of the natural world. God, it says, *provides each species with the wisdom to survive. But there is more to life than survival; there is celebration. Humans are given wine to gladden the heart and oil to make the face shine with happiness. God has God's own tall trees that God waters. Even when lions are roaring, they are calling to the Divine. God even plays in the ocean with the huge sea creature called Leviathan (104.26).*

The wisdom of Psalm 104 tells us that the natural world is not simply a place of wonder where creatures survive. It is a world in which God rejoices, celebrates like an artist, wanders like a gardener, and plays like a child. The ways of the wild are also ways that God loves and enjoys! The Psalm invites us to awe and to delight.

The gospel reading is more complicated. The *lilies of the field* sermon seems unhelpful at first hearing. We are told not to worry about food or clothing. God takes care of the creatures in the wild, so God will take care of us. Surely, this is quite unrealistic. Concern for food and clothing is basic to our nature! We have to take care of our bodily needs!

Perhaps Jesus' point, though, is that we should not "worry," in the sense of obsess, about such things as food and clothing. Jesus seems to want his hearers to focus their attention critically on the human drive to possess.

But there is also something deeper in his challenge.

This message has to be heard and understood in the light of Jesus's larger agenda, the reign or kindom of God. Jesus makes it clear that this kindom, this way of living, is in contrast to political or economic kingdoms of nations. Such kingdoms are about power and productivity, exploiting resources to increase possessions.

The reign of God, Jesus seems to be saying, is like the kingdom of the wild, where creatures live in harmony with nature and with the sacred source of life, their provider. We ought to live our lives in the same way, learning to fit into the ecosystems of creation rather than exploiting them.

The kindom of God and the kindom of the wild complement one another.

The sermon of Jesus tells us: *Consider the ways of the kindom of the wild and be wise. Learn from the domain of the wild to gain a closer relationship with the Creator, with Christ/Sophia, and Spirit filled creation.*

Open your eyes and ears to the message of the kindom present in the world around you.

It's a wonderful world...

Video clip:

Wonderful World (Louis Armstrong, David Attenborough) Intercession from UnitingEarthWeb.mp4

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=4&v=o1yBAYC7SwE