

All creatures great and small

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 8 September, 2019

A Contemporary Reflection by Warren Talbot

Creation 2C – Fauna Sunday

Job 39:1-12; Luke 12: 22-31; Psalm 104: 14-24, 31

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QNGa5-rGPTU>

We have just read part of the most integrated ecological creation account in the Jewish Scriptures. If we had read the full 35 verses we would see an underlying harmony of humans, other animals, and the rich biodiversity of planet Earth.

In some Jewish traditions, parts of Psalm 104 are read every day – it's that important.

Last week we heard two other creation accounts – Genesis 1 and Job 38. Genesis 1 is superb poetry in many ways. In particular, it affirms the goodness of the entire creation. God repeatedly says that the creation is good.

But Genesis 1 fails in the presentation of *homo sapiens* as the high point of creation whose role it is to rule over other creatures and the creation itself. The translation from the Hebrew might be debatable, but the text has been, and is, used to justify exploitation of both Earth's resources and other animals.

We heard more from Job this morning. Taken in isolation, chapter 39 of Job does extol the community of non-human animals. In context, however, it suffers from Yahweh's continued cruel interrogation of Job. Yahweh appears, yet again, as a jealous tribal god, not the ground and source of Creative Love in the universe.

Psalm 104, however, I believe is different. Psalm 104 is a clear demonstration that the Scriptural understanding of creation is not limited to Genesis 1 or to Job 38 and 39.

As an edited collection, the Psalms date from the second Temple in Jerusalem, that is, probably less than 500 years before the figure of Jesus. The content, however, dates much further back to the oral traditions of nomadic tribes living in the Middle East, eventually settling in Palestine.

As in all cultures and religions, the nomadic Hebrew tribes observed other animals and developed stories, myths and songs about them. They looked to the sky in awe and wonder, as do we, and asked: *Why? And How? And Who?*

What makes Psalm 104 an ecological Psalm, and especially appropriate for Fauna Sunday, is that it includes *homo sapiens* but the creation is not centered around *homo sapiens*. I counted four references to humans and eight references to other animals. We humans are - in fact, a very recent part of Divine Presence in the universe. A very recent part!

In late June of this year, we heard a Reflection here at Pitt Street from Professor David Clough. David took ten years to research and write a two-volume systematic theology called "*On Animals*". That systematic theology is, for the Christian Church, the wake-up call that the Australian philosopher Peter Singer gave to the wider community in 1973 with his book "*Animal Liberation*". I believe we'll be hearing much more in the coming years about David Clough's systematic theology on animals.

David Clough and colleagues have founded an organization called "*Creature Kind*". That organisation challenges us to "love" our animal neighbours and to seek the flourishing of all creatures. In specific terms, "*Creature Kind*" calls for an examination of industry practices involving farmed animals, and a serious discussion about the place of meat and meat products in our diets.

You can watch David's Clough's reflection at Pitt Street on our YouTube channel, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NzLjLN9jGU&t=5s>

A further resource is the late Barry Leal's book "*Through Ecological Eyes*" which has a very good chapter on animals and the Scriptures. Courtesy of Ros Leal, there are four copies available for loan from our ecology table at the rear of the church.

In the past, many Christians have played key roles in animal welfare. A founder of the RSPCA was William Wilberforce, an evangelical Christian who also campaigned against human slavery. Many cases of animal farming, solely for mass human consumption, can be described as animal slavery. None! None of God's creatures deserve to live in slavery.

The above discussion I presented on the intrinsic worth of animals argues that animals are deserving of worth and respect – and have dignity in many of the same ways in which we talk about dignity and respect for human animals.

It is obvious, however, that humans and other animals do have different roles in the Web of Life. I'm not suggesting a romanticized view of animals (especially human animals) or nature, for that matter.

This brings me to climate change. I assume that we broadly share an agreement that climate change is real, that humans are a major contributor and that urgent action is needed – now. In this context, the word "emergency" is not hyperbole.

The Australian Religious Response to Climate Change, of which Pitt Street is a member, works in two main ways. First, we engage in a range of actions to encourage renewable energy, and that means no new coal mines. On Friday, in the Galilee Basin, a number of ARRCC members and friends were arrested for their protest action against the opening of the Adani coal mine.

A second focus for ARRCC's work is that we encourage people and communities of faith to examine lifestyles to reduce our carbon footprint. The program is called "Living the change" – and it's an opportunity for individuals to make a commitment to one or more changes in lifestyles in the areas of energy use, transport, and food consumption. "*Eating less meat*" brings together the intrinsic ethical and theological focus emphasized by David Clough, with the urgent need to reduce carbon emissions.

Writing recently about climate change, the Australian writer, Richard Flanagan, stated that we will discover the language of hope in the quality of our courage.

"We will discover the language of hope in the quality of our courage".

The Psalmist could not have foreseen the crisis that Earth, our common home, now faces.

We have seen.

Now is the time for hope.

Now is the time for courage.

Amen.

References

Richard Flanagan, "Six sentences of hope: defining a unifying vision in the face of the climate crisis", *The Guardian*, 22 August 2019.

David Clough, *On Animals: Volume I: Systematic Theology* (London: &T Clark, 2014).

David Clough, *On Animals: Volume 2: Theological Ethics* (London: &T Clark, 2018).

CreatureKind, <https://www.becreaturekind.org/who-we-are>