

Reflection: Animal Blessing Sunday!

David Fotheringham, 11 October 2020

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Bible readings: Job 12:7-10; Matthew 6:25-29

Loving God, give us wisdom to perceive you, diligence to seek you, patience to wait for you, eyes to behold you, a heart to meditate upon you, and a life to proclaim you. Amen

For those of us who tend to do a fair bit of commuting, spending a lot more time at home and locally has meant a more time for noticing the growth of trees, the budding of flowers, and calls of baby birds. I suspect that those birds, in return, are appreciating that we haven't been polluting the air with our usual amounts of exhaust fumes, too.

These things are good, in the midst of so much that is hard. Jesus, it appears in this passage, takes notice of the birds and the lilies. As a part of the Sermon on the Mount, as he talks about not serving both God and wealth he makes these observations about the trust of the birds and the flowers.

This is quite a moment in time to find Jesus gently challenging us with the advice to trust, and not worry. It takes some interpreting, of course. Some might want to argue that we should trust that the virus wouldn't really do damage and so we should carry on as if there were no pandemic; others would argue that we should trust that the restrictions are indeed making a difference for the sake of us all, and so we should trust God with us as we endure the challenges. I believe there are good reasons for the latter course, as an expression of our care for our neighbours and for us all.

Talking about trust, and not worrying is also pertinent to the week of the federal budget. It's a budget that for some has offered relief; for others, in the light of COVID's impact on the service industries, perhaps not so much; and the impact in full will take years to work out. For many people, the budget, and the actions of *all* levels of government, are a focus of worries: what will be the impact of their decisions on my future? We find ourselves wondering less about social safety nets, more about government safety nets; and perhaps these all displace our attention to the providence of God.

Don't get me wrong: Jesus is concerned for social justice, constantly demonstrating care for the outsiders, challenging leaders, and telling stories about being generous to our neighbours. But in this passage he completely sidesteps the question of whether government support for sectors and individuals are adequate. Instead, in this passage, he invites us to stop and consider the contrast between worrying about things we may not be able to change, and noticing the gifts of God.

It seems to me that this comes back to the wisdom of Sabbath.

The commandment for Sabbath keeping is one of the famous 10 Commandments, and it's put in Deuteronomy like this:

'Six days you shall labor and do all your work.
But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God;
you shall not do any work – you,
or your son or your daughter,
or your male or female slave,
or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock...'

Notice that animals are to be given their rest, too! That's pretty important for this Animal Blessing Sunday! And in Deuteronomy's formulation of this commandment, we are to rest on the seventh day because we can trust the God who brought us (our ancestors) out of slavery in Egypt where there had been no rest. God provided our ancestors with their context, God provides us with our context; so a Sabbath pause on our worries reminds us that the world of God, and the universe in which we are placed, are gifts.

In our passage today, Jesus doesn't ask us to *imitate* the birds or the flowers. He's not suggesting that we do nothing and assume that food will come to us, or neglect our clothing altogether. He doesn't ask us to *imitate* the birds or the flowers, but he *does* ask us to notice them. "Look at the birds of the air", he says, and "consider the lilies of the field." To do that, we need to pause our worries and look outside. And not just offer a quick glance, but look, and consider.

The 13th century Christian mystic, Meister Eckhart, once said this:

'Apprehend God in all things,
for God is in all things.
Every single creature is full of God,
and is a book about God.
Every creature is a word of God.
If I spent enough time with the tiniest creature
even a caterpillar
I would never have to prepare a sermon
so full of God
is every creature'

When we look and consider the world of the animals, perhaps we will see not just the world of tooth and claw but the beauty and providence within the spans that are allocated to each creature, and give thanks for them.

And when we do that, stepping away from our usual worries and recognising the gift of creation around us, we will be the more ready to give other creatures and other people their rest too, sharing what we have with generosity.

Jesus does not condone taking Sabbath *legalistically*, but here we are reminded to let God be God, to pause our daily worrying, and consider what gifts there are in life even around us.

Because as Job says,

‘ask the animals, and they will teach you;
the birds of the air, and they will tell you;
ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you;
and the fish of the sea will declare to you.
Who among all these does not know
that the hand of the LORD has done this?
In his hand is the life of every living thing
and the breath of every human being.’

To the glory of God.

Amen.