

2022 TALK FOR CAREY, 10.7.22, BIRDS & BEASTIES OF THE BIBLE (2)

JONAH 4:5-11, LUKE 13:10-17: 'FAVOURITE THINGS'

The story of Jonah is best-known for what ? The whale (or other sea creature). God uses a whale as an instrument of salvation. The whale swallows Jonah and so saves Jonah.

Jonah – what a guy! One of the grumpiest and angriest of all the prophets. Jonah wanted God to destroy this enemy city of Nineveh. Jonah wanted his prediction to come true. Without that his reputation as a prophet was in tatters. No wonder Jonah wanted to die.

But here's the good news. God is concerned for the people of the great city of Nineveh. 120,000 people. **And** God is also concerned for the animals of this great city. He hasn't forgotten them either. God could have produced a full itinerary of all the animals living in the city of Nineveh at that time. And in chapter 3, we see the animals of the city also being clothed in sackcloth and ashes. The animals are involved in Nineveh repenting and turning back to God. Every one of those people, and each of those animals, we are told, God was concerned for. Our LORD wants people and animals to be saved together.

Are we, like God, concerned for the rest of creation? It is right for us to celebrate the 'birds and beasts of the Bible'. Did anyone see a story on the news this week about how avian flu is now decimating colonies of sea birds on the coasts of Britain?. I'm sure all those who saw this were sad about the effects of this disease on British wild bird populations. A disease caused by and spread by the human poultry industry... We need to think about that...

Here's a bird you don't see every day. (PHOTO) Remarkable bird. Very striking. I was very excited to see one of these, ever so briefly, when I was in Turkey. Very rarely sighted in Britain. It lives in the Mediterranean and north Africa. Any guesses, what we call this bird ? Hoopoe, after it's 'oop, oop, oop' call. The Hoopoe is mentioned twice in the Bible. Not in a good way, because it is listed as 'unclean' in the Law of Moses. That might be something to do with their messy and very smelly nests. This is thought to be one way they deter predators. But guess what ? The Hoopoe is now the national bird of Israel. That's quite a turn-around. A remarkable rehabilitation.

It reminds me of the Apostle Peter's vision in Acts 10. This is an important passage in terms of creation care. Peter sees a blanket full of all sorts of creatures, coming down out of heaven. Many of these creatures Peter has treated as 'unclean', throughout his life. From the Law, Peter knows he should have nothing to do with them. But he is told by God, 'Do not consider anything unclean that God has made clean'. Of course, the vision is about Peter sharing the good news of Jesus with both Gentiles and Jews. But there is another message too: All of God's creation is kosher. All of God's creation is good.

Now here's one of my favourite animals. This is a photo of a Brown Bear. (PHOTO) The bears mentioned in the Bible are probably a smaller species. Black Bears. But Brown or Black, these are not an animal I've ever got close to! ... Except at zoos. I have seen some stuffed, standing on their hind legs, with their paws out and their mouths open in a growl. (Seen one of those?) We are rightly wary of these big creatures. Any Canadian will tell you why.

But of course, we have quite an affinity with bears. We have made them into our teddy bears. Paddington Bear. (Has everyone seen the Jubilee video of the Queen with Paddington Bear at Buckingham Palace ? Well worth watching).

But not that long ago, you might have seen bears on chains in the streets of our towns. Thankfully, we have put a stop to the awful practice of 'bear-baiting'. We are concerned for God's creatures. But are we concerned enough?

So, that's the question I want to leave us with this morning. God told Jonah he wasn't concerned enough about the people and the animals of Nineveh. What is God saying to us?

Every Sunday morning we express our concern for our fellow human beings. In different ways. But God also tells us to be concerned for our fellow creatures too. The Birds and Beasts of the Bible are not meant to be an after-thought. And St Francis is NOT the only saint known for his close connection with the animal kingdom. St Cuthbert and St Kevin are just two others I could mention. (Yes, there is a Saint Kevin). The story goes that he was so long, holding his hands out in prayer, one day, that a blackbird started to make a nest in his outstretched hands. And he didn't want to disturb her, so Kevin stayed in an attitude of prayer until those baby blackbirds had flown the nest. A fanciful tale of course. But one which again reminds us of our need to sacrifice our own plans, our own agendas, for the good of creation.

We should take more notice of the Birds and Beasties of the Bible. And of the birds and beasties around us – and what they can teach us of the Kingdom of God. (Read poem – ‘Ducks’?). Thanks be to our LORD, King of all creation.