

Adelaide Synod Sermon 2021

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Genesis 2:15-20

15 The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. 16 And the LORD God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."

18 Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." 19 So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. 20 The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner.

Romans 4:1-8

1 What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? 2 For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. 3 For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." 4 Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. 5 But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness. 6 So also David speaks of the blessedness of those to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works: 7 'Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; 8 blessed is the one against whom the Lord will not reckon sin.'

Psalms 32:7-11

*7 For this cause shall everyone that is faithful
make their prayer to you in the day of trouble:
and in. The time of the great water-flood,
it shall not come near them.*

*8 You are a place to hide me in,
you will preserve me from trouble:
you surround me with deliverance on every side.*

*9 'I will instruct you, and direct you in the way that you should go:
I will fasten my eye upon you, and give you counsel.*

*10 'Be not like a horse or a mule, that have no understanding:
whose forward course must be curbed with bit and bridle.'*

*11 Great tribulations remain for the ungodly:
(but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD [NRSV].)
but whoever puts their trust in the Lord,
mercy embraces them on every side.*

*12 Rejoices in the Lord, you righteous, and be glad:
and shout for joy, all you that are true of heart.*

Luke 12:1-7

1 Meanwhile, when the crowd gathered by the thousands, so that they trampled on one another, he began to speak first to his disciples, "Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees, that is, their hypocrisy. 2 Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. 3 Therefore whatever you have said in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have whispered behind closed doors will be proclaimed from the housetops.

Exhortation to Fearless Confession

4 'I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that can do nothing more. 5 But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him! 6 Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten in God's sight. 7 But even the hairs of your head are all counted. Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

You arrive and are greeted by the aroma of freshly brewed coffee and freshly baked biscuits. Maybe you prefer a cup of tea, you get your drink pick up a biscuit and find a place to sit at the invitation of your host, a fellow clergy person of the local deanery. Generally, you look forward to these regular deanery meetings; you have a genuine affection for your fellow clergy, and over the months and years you have come to trust them. It was difficult last year, where the only way to meet as a deanery was via Zoom; it's been good to get back to face-to-face meetings.

There is a niggling thought in the back of your mind though; by nature, you are an optimist, and there has been a growing tendency for an air of despondency, maybe even an ever-increasing malaise to permeate the conversations. Some of it is attributable to the weariness associated with the ongoing pandemic; some of it is the result of the personal and corporate fears related to the continued decline in the church, both in general and, of course, specifically for the congregation you serve. You reflect on how the pandemic seems to have accelerated the decline for some congregations, has brought things to a head. You hope that today's conversation might take a more promising direction; there is only so much sharing of gloom that you can tolerate.

The scenario could relate to any type of church meeting of lay people, clergy and a mix of both. Maybe its a parish council, a study group, a meeting of lay leaders. Possibly this has not been your personal experience but let me assure you that there have been many meetings where participants have felt burden by despondency and a general sense of malaise; by a seeming rehearsing of all that is wrong.

By now, you might be wondering where is he going with this sermon. The Archbishop might be thinking did I make the right decision in inviting Bishop John to preach?

Is he going to encourage us to be optimists, telling us to focus on the positive? Are those of us who feel despondent or exhausted by these past months going to feel blamed for our feelings? Is he going to paint a rosy picture of what the future might be? How are today's readings going to fit in with this introduction and make sense for us?

Well, let's see.

The beginning of Genesis is an expression of God's good purposes. God brings the created order out of chaos by speaking the words, the divine Word, carried on the breath of God; " 'the creative Word

that brings into being that which speaks.' "¹, human. There is an ordering of things, everything in its place and with its part to play. In Chapter One we read that on each of the six days of creating, God concludes that it is good. On the seventh day, God contemplates the creation and determines that it is not only good but is, in fact, very good.

Chapter Two of Genesis gives us a different account of God's creative activity; it should not be read as nullifying the account in Chapter One. Instead, it looks at God's activity from a different perspective. In the section of this second account, which we heard today, particularly verse 19 and the first half of verse 20, God creates the animals of the field and the birds of the air and brings them to the man, the representative human, to name.

There is a purpose prompting the writer of the second account of creation, part of that purpose is to express the concept of 'dominion' differently. To know the name of something or someone is significant. To have named the animals of the field and the birds of the air is to have authority over them. There is a sort of power in naming, a kind of control bestowed upon the one who names them or knows the name of them.

As a side note related to names it is here that human: adam is split into ish: man and ishah: woman, only now at the same time both are distinguished as different – oneness is affirmed, partnership is affirmed, in the names that are allotted.

The Jewish understanding is that names represent identity not simply because they are a convenient way to distinguish between creatures, and for that matter, between people. It is because they define us. The names we are given at birth aren't accidental. They are, to some extent, prophetic. They capture our essence. They are the keys to our soul.

The Hebrew word for soul is neshamah. Central to that word, the middle two letters, shin and mem, make the word shem, Hebrew for 'name.' Your name is the key to your soul. Naming something identifies that thing. To know the name of something gives us, as I have said, some level of authority over it.

There is nothing wrong with gathering together and sharing the fact that we are feeling despondent. We are experiencing a sense of malaise, discomfort, unease and are finding it difficult to identify the cause of that malaise. In naming our everyday experience as despondency or malaise is to go some of the way to taking back control; to name the underlying causes which may include uncertainty about our future or the future of the congregation we serve; even to name the fact that maybe we are unsure of how to act; or even that we don't know what to do is an essential step in regaining control, to gain agency which the Social Sciences define as one's independent capability or ability to act on one's own free will.

¹ Elaine Graham, Heather Walton and Frances Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods*. 195

I would suggest, therefore, that the first step in dealing with what faces us and our associated feelings, thoughts and emotions is to name the situation not just our feelings and thoughts; to develop a rich description of what is happening without blaming those who are feeling overwhelmed or by passing judgement upon ourselves as failing, and then to reflect upon it theologically.

In today's reading from Romans, we read that Paul wrote, in the second part of verse 3, *Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness*, and later in verse 6, *So also David speaks of the blessedness of those to whom God reckons righteousness irrespective of works... .* While we are in the process of considering the difficult situation we face, as we name what is going on, and while we develop a rich description of what is happening for us and to us, we need to be grounded in what we believe, grounded in the faith we hold to be true. Faith founded on the bedrock of God's loving action toward the creation, indeed on the impetus of love that brought the action into being, that brought all that is into being in the first place, and in the loving action made flesh and blood in the Son of God, in Jesus God's anointed one.

Amongst the doubts, the emotions, the thoughts, the state of despondency and malaise stands Jesus. God's Son, who went through trials and tribulations, scourging and crucifixion and yet demonstrates agency even from the cross on which he dies.

No one, least of all me, is expecting you to put on a happy face and to join the likes of those who were crucified at the end of Monty Python's movie *The Life of Brian* and start singing: *Always look on the bright side of life!*

What I am reminding you about is that even in the moments when we choose to respond to the situation which faces us with neither flight nor fight, but rather with freeze, as if we are caught in the crosshairs of an oncoming truck, that we can still hold on to the one in whom we have faith, Jesus, and to what we believe in and through him. To allow Paul's words to resonate within us in the situation we face and acknowledge that we are blessed and reckoned righteous for our beliefs even when the works, which normally are our response to God's love of us, are beyond us for a while.

The Psalm can help us understand the basis of our belief, a belief that sustains us and maintains our righteousness. It is one of those occasions when the translation of the Psalm for liturgical use loses some of its meaning. The liturgical psalter has this translation of verse 11:

11 *Great tribulations remain for the ungodly:
but whoever puts their trust in the Lord,
mercy embraces them on every side.*

The NRSV translates the beginning of the second half of this verse as, *but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD*. The translator of the liturgical psalms may have chosen to use 'mercy' as an equivalent as the New Testament tends to use God's mercy, grace, compassion and faithfulness in place of steadfast love. It is God's steadfast love that surrounds those who trust or believe in the Lord. It is that steadfast love that sustains us through trials and tribulations, even in the midst of the times when faith becomes a little slippery and elusive. Steadfast love translates the Hebrew word *hesed* or *chesed*. It is a significant word in the Old Testament; it occurs some 250 times. It expresses God's complete loving commitment to God's good creation in its entirety, a loving commitment that can not be shaken. *Hesed* is the true commitment to love unconditionally. *Hesed* is the cosmic glue; it is the dynamic that maintains the communal relationship of the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, it is the essence of the incarnation, Jesus is God's *hesed* made human flesh; God's love which walked among us showing compassion, mercy and grace.

It is so easy for us to act according to the norms of the society within which we live. We live in an age that seems to have decided to live down to the lowest common denominator, an age where we are called to be less than that what we truly can be. It has even become a characteristic of our modern-day politics; we don't seem to have had politicians who call us to a more excellent vision, who call us to triumph over the challenges that confront us instead of denying that they exist as in the case of Climate Change, who cast a picture of a future we can aspire to. Instead, we seem to have politicians more interested in being reelected and who serve, at worse vested interests and at best themselves. This is an example of a modern-day 'yeast of the Pharisees'; it is a projection of hypocrisy, as it was so long ago. We need to take the warning seriously in Luke's gospel that we should not fear that which can destroy the body, but rather that which can decimate our very being. The failure here is not to hold faith with the one who is the living embodiment of *hesed*, steadfast love, Jesus. To the one who knows the value of two sparrows and that our values is inestimable and who has accounted for each hair on your head. To be known in such details is to experience the steadfast love of God. Instead of living down to the principles upon which our society seems to be currently founded, we are to live up to the vision of the Kingdom of God, to that which we are called to give our primary allegiance, the place of our first citizenship. It is a call to lift our eyes above the horizon.

It's ok to recognise that we are afflicted; we are! What is not ok is to remain in that state, continuously rehearsing the pain of the affliction. Jesus' time of greatest affliction is surely in the Garden of Gethsemane, yet even there the Christ says in Matthew 26:39:

"My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me;... yet not what I want but what you want."

Our purpose in creating a rich description of what is happening is to use it as a starting place to discover what is happening theologically, to name it and, by doing so, gain some new agency within the midst of the affliction. Our agency needs to be grounded in belief and faith in God's steadfast

love, God's hesed. In acknowledging that God values us so highly that he knows the number of hairs on our head. Even when we feel dis-abled by events, feel un-able to act that our faith, or belief in the God who is embodied hesed, steadfast love, still counts us as righteous, as blessed.

Amid despondency, amid malaise, God's hesed surrounds us! You, sisters and brothers, are surrounded by God's steadfast love!