

Sermon 15th August 2021 – Care of Creation; Cain and Abel

Introduce work of the people video (2 min)

Good morning, we've had David Attenborough's 'It's a Wonderful World.' Now we're going to watch a 2-minute video from The Work of the People to transition into where we're going this morning.

Intro:

It's a timely sermon to be talking about Care of Creation, as you probably had seen, the IPCC report that was released this week: 100's of scientists 8 years in the making to confirm unequivocally what we already know, that we are rapidly destroying our home, and running out of time to fix it. We are in the midst of the greatest crisis humanity has ever faced. We're pushing our Mother Earth to the edge. And so, as the video suggested, I am coming from a place of lament this morning. I am wanting us to enter into the grief of what we have done to God's good creation. "To acknowledge that which is already lost, and that which is too late to save." (Hannah Malcolm). A spirit of lament is where we must begin if we are to see healing.

Explain the trashed cross

God gave Jesus to show us how much God loves us and wants to be with us, yet we rejected him and crucified him, wanting to go our own way. In the same way, God's beautiful creation is another gift revealing God's abundant love. But from the moment we first stretched out our hands to take rather than to receive, enough has never been enough for us, and so in the same way we have crucified God's gift of creation.

Reveal Cross

I wonder how this image makes you feel? What does it provoke in you? Hold those feelings.

Problem in the world

"I can't breathe." This was the phrase that Bill McKibben says defined 2020 around the world. Raped initially by security guard George Floyd as a police officer knelt on his throat for twenty minutes. Millions around the world marched in protest, risking themselves to another threat of not being able to breath – the Coronavirus. Add to that some of the worst

wildfires the world has ever seen in California and Australia, Melbourne reaching hazardous levels of air pollution. The Governor of California telling residents to tape up their windows. People couldn't breathe because summer temperatures in many parts of the world are going beyond the boundaries the human body can tolerate. Breath. It is something that unites us all as humans. We all need it to live. But many cities live constantly with unhealthy level of air pollution. With the struggle to breathe. And it is an injustice. They cannot breathe.

This cross covered in rubbish represents our participation in not only the destruction of the planet, but how it is a justice issue, affecting the world's poorest. I crucify Christ every time my careless greed unwittingly asphyxiates the poorest people on the planet. Or deprives them of the chance to live and flourish. They can't breathe. It's what we're doing to our planet, to our brothers and sisters.

Problem in the text

Breath. It is also the name of one of the characters in our reading today. Abel, *Habel*, in the Hebrew means breath (vapour, vanity). Thought to be named so in the story because of the shortness of his life. But I wonder if Abel represents what it means to recognise our humanity and dependence on God? The Psalmists recognises that all of humanity, regardless of lot in life, is but breath before God, and finds solace in this fact. Abel expresses a truth which is essential to the very existence of humanity.

Perhaps it is from this posture, seeing all as gift, created by a good and loving God, that Abel can give from the first fruits of his flock. It is a posture of trust, that God is good and desires to provide. It is a posture of worship, his offering pleasing to God. Abel. Breath. God invites us into a relationship like Abel, to see ourselves as wholly dependent on God.

But unfortunately, the human story has been that of Cain. Eve names Cain so in the narrative because it sounds like the Hebrew word *qanah* – to acquire, to take.

This theme of taking in the face of God's giving is a theme that runs throughout the opening chapters of Genesis, setting the stage for two human postures. One of trust, receiving God's goodness, like Abel. The other of reaching out our hand and taking. Nahum Sarna, a Jewish commentator of Genesis, said that the contrasting details of their offerings highlight differences in their hearts and minds. Abel's offering was an act of "an ungrudging, openhearted devotion" whereas "Cain's noble purpose was sullied by the intrusion of the

self.” He goes on to suggest that this very first act of worship presents two diverse approaches that will “characterise the religion of Israel.”

I wonder if Cain is so named to represent our possessive ego, the self that is driven by fear to look out for number one. To gain a little more security for ourselves. The possessive self brings an offering to God, but only brings a portion, and never the first fruits, out of fear for self. It is a posture that stems from failing to trust in God’s goodness. It is the posture of the man in the parable who after an abundant harvest decides that what he needs is bigger storehouses for himself.

Cain is unable to bring the first fruits of the offering, and only brings a portion because of this desire for self-preservation and lack of trust.

Yet God still invites Cain, to reconsider his posture in relation to God, that he might be accepted.

Yet for the possessive ego, the only way to be accepted by God, to be blessed, is to eliminate the competition. For Cain, the possessive self, everything is a zero-sum game. For me to win, you must lose. This zero-sum game has fuelled throughout human history Colonisation, racism and of course viewing the planet as resources to be exploited, of which we need to get as much of the pie as we can before somebody else does. In the 2017 movie *All the Money in the World*, about the richest man in the world, John Paul Getty and his kidnapped grandson, when challenged by Mark’ Walberg’s character, ex-CIA agent and advisor tells Getty that he just needs to pay the ransom, Getty replies, “I do not have the money to spare.” “No one has ever been richer than you are at this moment, what would it take for you to feel secure?” Getty replies, “More.”

And what does this zero-sum game attitude, this posture of self-preservation mean, for us here in NZ when we have just been declared the number one place to survive what has been termed a “global de-complexification event”? Will we open our hearts and homes and wallets to those around the world less fortunate than ourselves, to those who are struggling to breathe, or will we keep our borders closed to the suffering in the world?

So, I want to lament this morning the reality that we have been Cain, rather than like Abel. The ideology of scarcity has won by default because of our lack of trust in an abundant God. Enough is never enough.

Maria Vinueza says that lament is the first step towards repentance/radical change, it is to:

- Recognise and name the damage that humans have made to their environments.
- See, observe, listen attentively, without giving excuses; in a non-defensive way.
- Acknowledge the pain and destruction that humans have brought to other species
- Take responsibility for the part that 'We' - 'I' have played in that destruction.
- Look at 'my' own thoughts, attitudes, behaviours and life choices that contribute to kill the 'Common House' we live in.

Solution in the text

So where's the hope? The hope is that Abel's breath isn't the only breath cut short in this story.

On the cross, when Jesus breathed out his last breath, it says in Luke's gospel he cried 'with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commend my **spirit (also could be translated breath)**." Having said this, he **breathed** his last.' I have heard that death by crucifixion meant death by asphyxiation. The body so exhausted, the victim is no longer able to push themselves up to exhale. On the cross, Christ joins with George Floyd, and all those dying from air pollution who rasp, "I can't breathe." He identifies with their suffering. But Jesus' final breath wasn't vapor. It wasn't in vain. He also declared, "It is finished." This 'it is finished' is about Jesus entering the suffering of all of creation and beginning the restoration of all of creation.

And after his resurrection, Jesus **breathes** on his disciples and he says, "receive the Holy Spirit" in John 20:22. This is a unique word in the New Testament. This is a new kind of breath. An empowering breath. A life-giving breath. It is the breath that enables the disciples to receive the power to live in Christ's way. In right relationship with God, with others, with creation. To live as Abel rather than Cain.

Solution in the world

So too today, Jesus empowers us to say, "enough" to the zero-sum game. To take deep

breaths of contentment. By faith in the Gospel we believe that the God of abundance has provided and provides more than enough for all of us were it rightly and faithfully distributed. We can finally be satisfied in Christ. The satisfactions promised by the system often leave us wanting, desiring, demanding more. In fact they are designed to. (McDonald's ad?) But satisfaction can be found in Christ.

I believe the Eucharist is a means of finding contentment. We talk about it as a meal, a meal of a mm thin wafer, and a thimbleful of port. Yet somehow it satisfies. Why? Because we approach it with a posture of gratitude and thanksgiving, of seeing our very selves as utterly dependent on this gift. We savour the elements as if they are our last meal. We leave satiated (even if we still have room for lunch). What would the world look like if we took that sacramentally, that appreciation of all as gift, that contentment, grateful for our very breath, into all of our lives? So that we, as in the words of our prayer book, may so live that others be not deprived of **air**, food, water, shelter, or the chance to live.

Invitation

So what we are going to do now to respond is, a song is going to be played, Who's Gonna Stand Up? by Neil Young. It is a challenge and an invitation to consider what we are going to do to be a part of Christ restoring work in our world. This is a space for lament. Perhaps you want to write a prayer or Psalm of lament. Maybe you want to consider committing to something, to pledge to do something, and you will find some pen and paper that you may want to write on, either to leave at the cross or to take home.

You may feel like me sometimes and think that we're beyond the point where individual action makes a difference. Yep, we are. But when we come together, organised and mobilised, it is remarkable the difference we can make together. And to symbolise that, this morning as we come to communion, I invite you to remove a piece of the rubbish, placing in the basket, and then to replace the rubbish with a flower or two. A symbolic action of our acknowledging our part we have played, but also our responsibility that as we go from the Lord's table, we go empowered to join in the reconciling and restorative work of Christ for all of Creation.