

## SERMON AWE AND WONDER – The Joy of Creatures ST FRANCIS

2 years ago, our Life group took our annual weekend away together for the usual mix of bible study, prayer, good conversations, food, fun and laughter.

One staple ingredient is always a walk in nature. And this particular year around 8 of us made our way along the Waipu estuary. As we were walking, we suddenly encountered this beautiful *expression* of God's handiwork.

And we all stopped, and we had this sacred moment where we stared at Her and she at us. It was a really precious moment of two totally different species gazing into each other's eyes and being enthralled by the sight of each other. At least I like to think she was as enthralled with us as we with her.

After a while she took to the water but stayed close - and then treated us to various displays of sea acrobatics. It didn't take us long to realise she was basically showing off.

She probably thought, 'well if you're all going to stand and stare at me, I may as well give you something worth seeing'.

At one point she even emerged from underwater nonchalantly holding a fish in her mouth that she showed us, before flipping it back into the water unharmed.

At the end of that weekend, we all talked about our individual highlights. These included our rich time of scripture study, precious time of prayer, plus the food, drink and laughter times.

**But THE highlight was our holy encounter with God's beautiful creature.**

For me, this was actually the 3<sup>rd</sup> memorable time that year where an encounter with one of God's creatures had brought me a sense of deep joy and a spirit of awe and wonder.

4 months previous, Kim and I had visited Myah in Dunedin and experienced the truly majestic and breath-taking sight of seeing an Albatross fly right over our heads down at the colony in Dunedin. It was the first time in my life.

And then we went next door to the Blue Penguin Centre, and along with around 50 other people we waited for an hour for dusk to arrive so that we could all watch these beautiful little penguins emerge from the sea and their day's endeavours.

We watched in awe as they went through their daily ritual of grouping together for safety as they emerge from the sea, before making a dash across the beach to their nesting homes.

We were all standing on a platform built above their homes. And they just walked past us casual as, and we were told that they were greeted by their spouses.

The whole experience brought tears of joy to my eyes as it did to others. And I couldn't help but feel a sense of hope for humanity that we actually care enough about another species to spend money to watch them do what they do every day of their lives.

Can you imagine if another species paid good money to wait outside Woolworths to watch a bunch of humans going about their daily business. And what really cemented this sense of awe, is when the guides at the penguin place told us that during Covid - when there were no people coming to see them - the penguins actually grew sad. They were missing their connection with humans.

So the workforce erected pretend cut outs of humans on the deck to give the penguins the sense of connection they were clearly missing. **Pause on that thought!**

The penguins missed their relational connection with human beings.

**I tell you these stories because these experiences of God's creatures confirm something valuable to me. That grows by the year.**

I regard these moments as deeply spiritual encounters that nourish my soul in deep and meaningful ways. And in a world where so much can diminish our souls, they breathe a life-giving spirit into me.

They remind me of just how important it is to see these manifold expressions of God's creative works as worthy of my reverence, respect and gratitude. They remind me that if we fail to appreciate this sense of a Divine connection, we do so at our own spiritual loss.

**It's why I fell in love with this quote as soon as I heard it. It's from the 13<sup>th</sup> century Christian Dominican theologian, Meister Eckhart. "Every single creature is a book about God."**

Every single creature reveals to you and I, something of God's handiwork and glory. And Eckhart is simply echoing the words of **Job 12:7 ... "Ask the animals, and they will teach you. Ask the birds of the sky, and they will tell you."**

What they will teach and what they tell us – is that you are I and all humanity are in a **sacred relational connectedness** to all of nature and to God's creatures. And when we have these life-giving encounters that thrill and delight us, we are intuitively recognising and experiencing this Divine Connection.

**PAUSE FOR A MOMENT - and think of an encounter with one of God's creatures that has brought you to a place of joy and wonder.  
Where you sensed this sacred connection.**

So on this day of celebrating St Francis, let's spend a few minutes exploring why St Francis is St Francis. Why has his life and beliefs had such a profound impact across race and cultures over the centuries?

**I believe it's wrapped up in the Truth I gave in week one of this sermon series.**

I said that in regard to our own spiritual faith formation - there is an indisputable truth at play.

If we want to experience the full life-giving presence of God in every aspect of our lives - we have to recognise God's presence in **ALL** of His Creation. If we want the **FULLNESS** of God – we must recognise the **ALLNESS** of God.

**And St Francis got this. Totally!** Not only did he care for the poor - and practise peace - he also recognised the Divine Signature of God in **all** of Creation.

The sacred connection between God, people and all of nature. He had fully formed faith.

**It's why he was moved to say these words? "All creatures of the family of heaven and earth, have each in their own tongue, an unceasing voice of praise and thanksgiving to the Creator."** Which are thrilling words from Francis, and Martin Luther no less, completely agrees. **"God's entire divine nature is wholly and entirely in all creatures, more deeply, more inwardly, more present than the creature is to itself."**

Now Francis and Luther are not exactly theological bedfellows, but the reason they both arrived at this deep wisdom, is because they both understood the profound Truth given to us today in Genesis 1. When God BRINGS INTO BEING **the heavens and the earth, the morning and the evening, the waters and the sky – the land and plants that bear beautiful fruit – and all living creatures including humankind made in God’s image ... What does God say?**

### **What’s God’s expression of *delight*?**

Well, all though Genesis 1 we hear the same refrain ... **“And God saw that it was good.”** Now I just want to unpack ‘good’, because it’s such an everyday expression - we lose the fullness of its scope.

When someone asks me how my night out was, I can say, “yeah it was good’. We had a really good time. **But this is NOT what God means by ‘good’.**

The Hebrew word given here is **TOV**, and it carries rich layers of meaning. And each of these layers takes us to a way more expansive understanding of what God means - when He declares His creative works as GOOD.

This is God declaring ... **“I have created all of this for one purpose.”**

**‘To exist within a web of relational harmony for each other’s mutual benefit and flourishing’. ‘I have created ALL of this to reflect My delight and My glory in My world. This is my gift’.** This is the fullest meaning of TOV. The state of Shalom and wholeness.

**And it’s this profound truth - right here at the starting point of ALL Creation – that Francis, Luther and Meister Eckhart got completely.**

We share the same Creator Maker as **everything** in nature. So by definition we all carry the same Divine Signature.

This is why our Life Group encounter with the sea lion was a weekend highlight.

This why my encounter with the albatross and penguins struck a deep chord in my soul. This is why the penguins missed the humans during covid.

We’re all related. We are all expressions of God’s loving design and purpose for **His** creation. So when you and I delight in God creatures, we are sharing in God’s delight.

- Isn’t this why people go on safaris to catch a glimpse of animals in the wild?
- Go on boats in the hope of seeing whales or dream of swimming with dolphins. Creatures of joy who transmit their love of life to us?
- Go scuba diving or snorkel to witness the myriad creatures displaying breathtaking colours?
- Take our kids to farms and watch their intrigue and delight at seeing and feeding the animals?
- Isn’t this why we go to enormous efforts to create environments like Tiritiri Matangi and Zealandia, just so we can treasure the beauty of birds as they fly across the vaults of the sky? And how impoverished would we be, without the beautiful symphony of birdsong in the morning? It’s one of THE gifts and delights of life and what it means to be human?

And let’s not forget our pets. Why do we keep horses, dogs, cats, guinea pigs, rabbits, gerbils, goldfish, budgies? Why do we pay huge sums of money just to keep them healthy and we

patiently clean up their mess every day? Why do we put signs on lampposts for missing pets saying, ‘has anyone seen Tiddles’?

**Well, we know why.**

It’s because of what **we** receive from **them**. The gift **they** bring to us.

Companionship, comfort, connectedness, joy and wonder. The truth of Meister Eckhart. **“Every single creature is a book about God.”**

**And just in case anyone is thinking – What’s all this got to do with Jesus?**

Remember we believe in a **Triune God**. Its why I made John 1 the gospel reading for the 2<sup>nd</sup> time this series. It connects us back to Genesis 1. **“In the beginning.”**

We believe that Jesus is one part of the Trinity. Christ the Word made flesh, there **with God** at the beginning of time. And as John tells us, **“Through him ALL THINGS were made;** (including creatures) **and in Him was LIFE.** This isn’t just about our pets and all creatures, its about how much we recognise, cherish and are grateful – for all that God declared GOOD and gave as gift.

**I’ll finish with this.**

In our time of Holy Communion, we’ll be singing those exhilarating words from the hymn **How Great Thou Art.** **“Then sings my soul, my Saviour God to thee.”**

We are a people who believe in the presence of a soul. As in, the deepest, truest essence of who we are in God. And there is much in our world today that can diminish our soul. Hence the terms *“it’s soul destroying”*. When something of our Divine essence is being lost.

**So how important is it, that we nourish our souls with the things that breathe life and make it sing?**

This is why I wanted to explore this theme today because I believe the legacy of St Francis reveals something very important for our own faith formation and well-being.

He recognised that Creatures aren’t just a *decorative* part of nature and Creation.

He recognised our sacred connection to them.

He recognised that creatures are fundamental to our own spiritual well-being.

**It’s how we delight, in God’s delight.**

By living in a sacred connection with all that God declared TOV. Good.

**So what might all of this look like for you this coming week?**

**To enjoy the sacred connection of all that God declared TOV! GOOD.**

- **What can the animals and the birds you encounter teach you.**
- **What can they tell you about your sacred connection with God.**
- **Look into the eyes of creature this week and see the reflection of God.**
- **Observe the birds and listen to the birdsong.**
- **Delight in knowing that you are participating in Gods DELIGHT.**

**God's entire divine nature is wholly and entirely in all creatures, more deeply, more inwardly, more present than the creature is to itself.”**