

Sermon Archive 555

Sunday 28 September, 2025

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reflections on the Kennel

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Introduction: Kennel or "dog house"?

At a pet shop just down the road from where I live, you can buy a kennel - if you want. The Animates Superior Villa Kennel is medium size. Medium size means 94 by 80 by 84 centimetres. It's made of "durable bevelled wood", with a shingle style asphalt roof. It stands on four little legs. The floor is detachable - for ease of cleaning. It comes flat packed for easy transporting - which means hours of frustration and probably several screws left over at the end of assembly - just make you wonder where they should have gone. It has plastic flaps for a door - to keep insects out. A matching kennel mat is sold separately. The villa kennel looks splendid in the photo - and costs \$150.

I know lots of people who have dogs - but I don't think I've ever seen a kennel. Do people have them? I guess they must, since the Met Service website includes a wee box called the Pet Forecast, which includes advisories about "outdoor housing". As I write this, the advisory for Ōtautahi Christchurch is "High Risk - use pet-safe heat packs. Check them often to ensure they're in good working order".

Maybe kennels are mainly for working dogs, rather than regular family pets. Although calling a kennel a villa, and making sure that it looks cute and cozy feels pretty domestic. Maybe the suburban kennel is indeed like a gift for the dog who already has everything. Not sure.

At the other end of the scale from the villa, though, there's the expression "you're in the dog house". "Kennel" is special; "kennel" is we-care-for-you. "Kennel" is good. "Dog house" is judgment. "Dog house" is one worse than sleeping on the couch. "Dog house" is bad.

For us today, this little villa is a symbol of the space we create for the animals. It stands for the provision we make for the non-human creatures to live. Whether that space, that provision, is "kennel" or "dog house" remains to be explored. And so we begin.

-ooOoo-

On a Wednesday in August, I woke up to the radio playing me an interview with Shane Jones, the Oceans and Fisheries minister. He was announcing new legislation to increase catch limits at times when fish are abundant. When asked whether the new legislation would mean larger numbers of fish coming out of the ocean, the minister said "no", then added: *"We're going to try and get rid of this yearly carnival, this orgy of litigation driven by these . . . environmental groups that quite frankly have stymied and glugged up the whole system; and we're trying to get a balance between ensuring that the industry can go out and effectively harvest, make some money for the country . . ."*

I guess the unnamed orgiastic environmental groups don't have the goal of making money for the country, in the same way that the fishing industry does. Their concerns must lie elsewhere. Is the new legislation restoring balance, or tipping the balance? Is this kennel or "dog house"?

Off the West Coast of the North Island, orange roughy is estimated to be down to 16% of its original abundance. Bottom trawling is damaging huge tracts of coral. Although the capture of sea birds is a problem, we don't need to worry about the Maui dolphin, since the minister insists that "there is no such thing as the Maui dolphin". What a relief! Are our current practices "kennel" or "dog house"?

Last month we also had some interesting conversations around the idea of de-extincting the giant moa. A group of scientists from Colossal Bio-sciences, part-funded by the Canterbury Museum, the Ngai Tahu Research Centre, and Sir Peter Jackson, is researching how to use vestigial DNA samples of the bird that was plentiful on these islands. Human beings arrived here around the year 1300AD, and the moa was gone by 1600AD. It took only 300 years to be wiped out. It was a matter, in those days, of over-hunting. Concerning the production of a new moa, the scientists note that any lab-produced moa would require a surrogate egg (but not even an ostrich egg would be big enough). There's also debate about whether any new bird (from a surrogate egg) would be a moa at heart, or just something with moa characteristics. In a fairly esoteric flourish, one scientist said any manufactured bird would not have the mauri (life force) of a moa. I wonder what that means - although I think I understand. Maybe the most interesting comment I heard in this conversation was from the Ngai Tahu Research Centre, where they noted that if a rather large moa were successfully to be de-extincted, there would be nowhere for us to put it. The Research Centre says "Parts of the eastern South Island were once covered in mosaics of open forest shrubland that were dominated by kowhai and lancewood, which have no analogue today."

In short, for the moa there is no "kennel". Our land management provides not even a "dog house". In the cartoon, the dog looks at the ashes that once was its home, and says "waah".



Music for Reflection

The First Lesson: Genesis 1: 24-31

Reflection: God almighty?

Then God said, "Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over the cattle and over all the wild animals of the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

Dominion - from the Latin "dominus" - lord, master. The same root gives us "dominate", "domineer". Perhaps unfortunate within the history of British expansionism in the Nineteenth Century is that "dominion" is what they called the administrative units from which they imposed foreign culture, charged taxes and made land confiscations on indigenous peoples. "Dominion" was very much "dog house". Strange isn't it, when in the creation story everything we knew about the Dominus by the time that human beings arrived was that the Dominus created, beheld, delighted, blessed and endowed freedom. Goodness knows where the despot behind "domination" came from!

In his book, God in Creation, the late Professor Jürgen Moltmann, talks about how the Renaissance brought a major shift in how humanity understood its role as the agent of dominion. He wrote this:

*whatever economic, social and political changes . . . may require mention, another factor was more important still in determining that way people four hundred years ago saw themselves. This was the new picture of God offered by the Renaissance . . . God is almighty, and [absolute power] is the pre-eminent attribute of . . . divinity. Consequently God's image on earth, the human being . . . had to strive for power and domination so that [it] might acquire [God's] divinity. **Power** became the foremost predicate of the deity, not **goodness and truth**. How might the human being acquire power? . . . Through science and technology, for "knowledge is power", as Francis Bacon exultantly proclaimed .*

. . In his theory of science, Descartes also declared that the aim of the exact sciences was to make [human beings] "masters and possessors of nature". . The scientific objectification of nature leads to the technological exploitation of nature by human beings.

In moving from "dog house" to "kennel", it is suggested that we need to recover a model of God less based on "almighty power", and more on "goodness and truth".

Hymn: Gentle God, when we are driven

Lesson: John 17: 6-12

Reflection: Jesus, the protective one.

We're only hearing one voice, but it's from this conversation that's going on between Jesus and his God. Jesus is talking through his thoughts about how he's cared for those whom he believes God entrusted to him. They were God's people, but for this short stretch of human life and ministry, it's been up to Jesus to shepherd them - to feed and defend them. In his shepherding, he's shared with them truthfully. He's given them fully from what he's had. He sincerely believes that he's been guarding them, and hasn't lost a single one. It's the language not just of diligence, responsibility, but also of affection. And now that he knows his time with them is coming to a close, his gentle prayer is that God will now protect them. I'm soon no longer to be in the world, but they're staying on here. So protect them, loving God. Guard and protect.

I think that this glimpse into this prayer is a gift for us who would want to grow our understanding of God not-almighty, but God good and true. The Lord, the Dominus in whose name we take our place in the world, and whose image we pray will daily become more evident in us, is the gentle One in this conversation about caring.

The question has been framed in terms of "dog house" or kennel. Along the way, the animals have cried. Along the way, also though, perhaps we have come across a new understanding of what it means to be God-like. Nothing to do with absolute power and dominion - but something more in the shape of the love of Christ.

Does the Dominus give a "dog house" or a kennel? Jesus is the protective One.

Listening for a word that heals us, and mends the way we care for the home of the animals, we keep a moment of quiet.

The Knox Church website is at: <http://www.knoxchurch.co.nz.html> . Sermons are to be found under News / Sermons.