

**Who Do You Say That I Am? (Job 39:1-8, 26-30)**

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I speak today simply as one pilgrim to another. I don't presume to have answers for you although there are along the way a few truths that I want to be clear about. I do have lots of questions to share and these I hope you will take away with you.

Jesus asked his disciples: "Who do you say that I am?" One of the questions I want to leave you with today is a different one: Who do we say that we are?

But first, why do we think that a passage from the Book of Job has been given as a reading for Fauna & Flora Saturday? Your immediate response might be: isn't it obvious given that the passage we've just had read to us is all about animals? Well, yes, it is but what is the Book of Job about as a whole?

The Book of Job is not not-about-animals but at the same time it really isn't about animals *per se* even though a lot is said about them. The Book of Job is first and foremost the Bible's most profound attempt to deal with the question of why there is suffering. To paraphrase the nub of the problem: why does God who is good, just and powerful permit suffering – specifically the suffering of humans but, by clear implication and almost explicitly, the suffering also of animals?

None of the possible answers posited by Job's three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, as to why there is suffering and, specifically, why Job is suffering so grievously, can Job accept – they just don't square with what he knows in his heart and from his own experience. And God backs him up. "The Lord says to Eliphaz ... : 'My wrath is kindled against you and your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.'" [Job 42:7] To cut to the chase, the fundamental point made in the Book of Job is that there is no answer to Job's question.

The implication of there being no answer to the question of why there is suffering is that Job has been asking the wrong question. The question that he should have been grappling with, and the question that we have to grapple with, is: what can we do about suffering?

In the process of getting Job to see things in a new light, God asks him a series of rhetorical questions, a sample of which we heard in the reading. These boil down to one fundamental question that is left implicit but could be paraphrased as... Job, who do you think you, and your fellow humans, are? Implicitly God, 'I Am', asks Job: who are you to me and who are you in

relation to all I have created and continue to create? Confronted by the Lord's questions Job has to rethink himself and do so in relation to the whole cosmos. And this leads him to a new perspective.

Through the questions God takes the conversation between Job and his friends out of the courtroom, as it were, where Job's "miserable comforters" as he comes to call them, act for the prosecution, Job mounts a spirited self-defence and God sits as judge, and into 'nature' where we see God as creator and lover of the universe. We humans now see that we are not at the centre of everything. We realise that it's not all about us. The Book of Job has God poetically portraying life on Earth as comprising a myriad of species of amazing beings whom God creates and values, each and every one of them for whom they are in their own right. Job and the rest of us humans are put in our place – not above nor below the animals but as their fellow creatures. We are simply the other animals' kin. They are, as John Muir characterised them, "our earth-born companions" or, as the poet Robert Burns called them, our "fellow mortals".

Far from it being all about us humans and what's good for us, it's actually all about being in right relationship with one another which is simply, intrinsically good ... and, as it happens, good for us all. But what might being in right relationship with one another mean and look like in practice?

Where do we as Christians turn for such guidance? I suggest that we look to the two greatest commandments. As we heard from Jesus, "the greatest and first commandment" is "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." [Mt 22:37–38] And how do we love the Lord our God? We love God by loving what God loves and by practically living out that love as best we can. And what does God love? – All that She has created and continues to create.

"And a second is like it," Jesus told us. "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." [Mt 22:39] So seemingly simple and straightforward a commandment but how do we understand it? Who is my neighbour? Where do I draw the boundaries of my neighbourhood? Are my neighbours only the people next door? Are my neighbours only the people in my particular community or suburb? Are my neighbours only the people more or less like myself? No, we cannot think that God sets limits on divine caring, kindness, mercy, compassion and love. The love of God who is love, is infinite – without boundaries, without limits.

So apart from all human beings being my neighbours, could animals be my neighbours too? There can be no doubt that God loves them. As the psalmist says of God, "Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains, your judgments are like the great deep; you save humans and animals alike, O Lord." [Ps 36:6] And, after all, we now know that animals are our biological relatives – they are literally our kin. We share with all of them some substantial proportion of our genes – indeed

up to 98.7% in the case of chimpanzees and bonobos. Could we consider even plants, trees and their fruit to be neighbours? After all, as an example, we share more than half of our genetic material with bananas. And what about the land, mountains, rivers and oceans? The atoms which compose our bodies have the same source as, and are actually the same as, the atoms that compose them. To put it more poetically, yet literally, everything on Earth is of stardust. We are truly as creations, creatures of God, all 'interbeings'<sup>1</sup> to borrow Thich Nhat Hanh's term.

So still on the second of the two greatest commandments – 'love your neighbour as yourself' – what do we understand 'as yourself' to mean? Does it mean 'You shall love your neighbour *as much as yourself*'? Could it mean 'Love your neighbour literally *as yourself – as part of yourself*'? Would this latter interpretation not resonate with what we know both from our relatively recently acquired scientific understanding as well as from our own experience – call it mystic experience if you will – of all that is One? We are part of what is much bigger than ourselves – part not only of a species but part of all life and indeed of all that God has created and continues to create on Earth and beyond. If so, we're talking about something way beyond compassion, kindness and love for 'others'. Animals are 'other than us' but they are also not-other-than-us since we participate in, we are part of the same, one creaturehood, one community of life, God's kingdom.

In proclaiming the two commandments on which "hang all the law and the prophets" as the greatest, Jesus was reminding us that before all else we are called to both reciprocate and share God's love. And with whom did Jesus say and model that it was most important to ensure that we share God's love? – the poor and vulnerable, those who cannot speak for themselves and are on the margins of society. In the world as it is now so totally dominated by human beings, are not our animal kin amongst the most vulnerable? Are they not amongst those who cannot speak for themselves – at least not in ways that the powerful and callous choose to hear? Do they not live on the margins of human society if not outside it, even while being so cruelly and disastrously impacted by human society?

So we must keep asking ourselves: How is it right for us to relate to and to treat our kin of other species? And what do we as moral beings do about their suffering? Where we have a choice, do we participate in perpetuating such suffering or do we seek to end or at least minimise, ameliorate and alleviate their suffering? Do we choose to take advantage of the at least perceived benefits of our animal kin's suffering or do we choose to forego such 'benefits'? The suffering I

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<sup>1</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh coined this term. He paraphrases the biologist Lewis Thomas who says "There are, [Lewis] says, no solitary beings. The whole planet is one giant, living, breathing cell, with all its working parts linked in symbiosis." [Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Art of Living* (HarperCollins Publishers; 2017)]

refer to is the full spectrum of animal suffering at the hands of humans: from their cruel and inhumane treatment in factory farms, the ripping away from mother cows of their young so that they produce milk for humans, the mass slaughter of sheep, cattle, pigs and chickens, the hunting and murder of wild animals as 'sport', the destruction of other species' habitats resulting in their extinction ... and so tragically we could go on. To bring home how entirely entangled each one of us is in all this, we face related moral choices every time we do our shopping for food.

Our common creaturehood, our kinship with all species, is one of the two profound truths that I wish us all to be reminded of today. The other is that we are called first and foremost to love and to love all that God loves, and to do so with all the passion which Jesus modelled in his life, death and rising as the Cosmic Christ.

Just as Job in chapter 12: 7-10 implores his unhelpful friends of impaired vision to "ask the animals, and they will teach you", let us ask them too. Sit down quietly sometime with one of those we call 'animals' (as if we are not one) – physically if possible but otherwise in your imagination – look into his or her eyes for as long as you're permitted to, and allow yourself to hear her or him asking you: Who do you say that I am?