

# Homily for People and Parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> March 2025, Lent 2

Readings: **Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18**

Philippians 3:17 – 4:1

**Psalm 27**

**Luke 13:31-35**

My study window looks across the verandah to two terraces of plants. On the lower terrace wall I have placed my late mother-in-law's birdbath, and I refill it every day. There is quite a community that uses this water and from my desk, while I write and read, I see something of this.

The most frequent users of the bath for drinking and washing are five noisy miner birds. These are social creatures and there can be three in the bath at the same time while the other two sit on the rim, all happily chirruping to each other. There is also a pair of pied butcher birds who come and whenever this happens the miner birds grudgingly give way, retreating to the low branches of a frangipani. The miner birds complain but who is going to argue with the butcher birds, who are like assassins with golden voices!

Seasonally, crested pigeons dance around each other in front of the wall and have a bath to cool off or get ready for the next session, while once in a while a pale-headed rosella flies in like royalty. The colours of these birds are so startling that everyone seems to hold their breath during their visits.

Two cheeky wallabies regularly drink from the bath early in the morning skimming water from the top of the dirt the birds have washed off... I then fill the bath in a rhythm that seems to work for everyone!

Two weeks before the cyclone a pair of magpies moved in and this has rattled the miner birds who seem to feel that the frangipani is too close for them to sit safely when the magpies are washing. Instead, they scold from the safe distance of the house gutter. The magpies appear to be immune to their commentary and strut around like well-dressed building inspectors... but, building inspectors who can sing!

There now seems to be some sort of singing competition going on between the butcher birds and the magpies, and the magpies are winning. I say this because the magpies sing when it's fair weather and when it's pelting with rain; their whole bodies abandoned to this work of singing.

I've been thinking about this magpie propensity for song and what they might teach me about singing and prayer in fair weather and foul.

Jesus spoke about an aspect of bird behaviour in the Gospel reading today. Very specifically he spoke about the way a mother hen gathers her chicks under her wings. We understand that hens do this to share warmth when it's cold, to offer shelter when it's raining, and sometimes to put a physical barrier between the chicks and predators. We also understand that the chick embryos are in tune with their mother hen's heartbeat so that there is comfort for them in this after hatching in the warmth offered by her body.

At the time of Jesus, I guess, many or most households would have had some chickens and would have observed this behaviour. In the text Jesus is remembered saying, '*Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!*' (John 13:34).

This is remarkable imagery for Jesus to use about himself, and about God. He suggests that God is like a hen gathering her chicks under her wings for warmth, shelter, and protection. It is such different imagery to the language of omnipotent king and judge we generally associate with God, for mother hen implies both love and vulnerability.

Let's come back to the three principal reasons that a hen gathers her chicks: warmth, shelter, and protection. When it's cold and a little chick body is unable to sustain warmth for itself the body heat and feather insulation provides an environment in which to be sustained, rest and grow. When rain and winds come and there is no shelter then the wings of the hen create a temporary shield from harm. While the protection element seems to be two fold: in *extremis* the mother hen puts her body on the line so that it is a barrier between the claws of a hawk and the bodies of her chicks; while more mundanely in being gathered together the young chicks are less vulnerable than when they wander off by themselves.

Jesus lived in an occupied territory of the Roman Empire known as *Palestina* in Latin. Roman soldiers were present to impose law and order, and a Roman governor ensured that taxes were collected. However, it seems from the text that it was not the Romans who Jesus was critiquing. It was not the Romans who had killed the prophets but rather Jewish authorities, both religious and political, over many centuries.

There was then a dissonance between the teaching of Jesus who said that God's love is more generous than we can understand, and the Jewish religious authorities who said that God's love is conditional on a person fulfilling religious laws.

The religious authorities stated that there was no place in God's love for tax collectors... while Jesus called them to live justly and assured them they were children of God; They religious authorities said that a person with leprosy had clearly sinned, that the disease was

God's judgement, and that therefore the person could not live within the safety of walled towns... while Jesus met with lepers, touched them, and brought healing and hope.

To the least, the lost, and the lonely of his society Jesus brought warmth, shelter, and protection... like a mother hen gathering her chicks under her wings.

In the light of this, I have three questions I'd love for us to think about in the unfolding of this week:

1. If Jesus were to come back to the land that used to be called *Palestina* – the land now known as the State of Israel and the Palestinian territories. Who would be the people that need the warmth, shelter, and protection that he offers?
2. Recognising that God continues to offer warmth, shelter, and protection in our time – through grace, kindness, and the continuing work of the Spirit. Who are the people in the places where we live who have need of these things? I recognise that this will include each of us but is not limited to us! Who are the least, the lost, and the lonely in the communities that we call home?
3. In the same way that Jesus recognised activity or behaviour in the natural world that spoke to him about the nature of God... what is something from the natural world in which you live that speaks to you about God?

Would you please join me as we close in prayer:

Loving God,

we give thanks for the many ways that the natural world reminds us of your continuing presence and creative work.

We thank you for the song of a magpie, and the nurturing wings of a hen; and we thank you for the warmth, shelter, and protection we find in you.

We ask for the grace and opportunity to share these things with others, in the name of Christ. Amen