

## *The Kingdom of Heaven and the Groan of Salvation*

St Philip's Anglican Church  
Seventh Sunday after Pentecost—23 July 2017  
Revd Martin Johnson

*Genesis 28.10-19a; Psalm 139.1-11, 23-24; Romans 8.12-25; Matthew 13.24-30, 36-43*

'Ow ya goin?' ... the classic piece of Strine. More often than not, it's not a question at all, merely a greeting. If it is responded to by more than a nod or a wave, the answer is often ... 'I'm gettin' there'. We are all gettin' there, we are all on pilgrimage. Jacob in this morning's reading from Genesis was on pilgrimage and, in a dream, saw the destination. Angels ascending and descending on a ladder between heaven and earth. 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.' The gate of heaven, the goal of our pilgrimage. For us our 'Ow ya goin?' should indeed truly be a question, because that is our calling. Our calling, our vocation is to listen for the answer, for the cry of despair, the cry for healing, for wholeness, for salvation. The beginning of journey in our Biblical tradition is a cry—the cry of the Hebrew people under the yoke of slavery, that cry heard by God in the Exodus and the pilgrimage from slavery to freedom. The cry of Jesus from the cross, heard by God in the pilgrimage from death to life. And today, among others, the cry of the created order groaning under the weight of human exploitation. It is our calling to listen.

No doubt many of you have heard the story of the mass beaching of starfish that took place a few years ago. A man was seen wandering on the beach amongst thousands of these stranded creatures. As he walked he would stoop and pick one up and throw it back into the sea. He was approached by another man, 'You're wasting your time mate, there's thousands of them, saving a few doesn't matter' 'No?' he replied stooping down and tossing another one back, 'But surely it mattered to that one?' The issue of climate change and the wise and careful use of our natural resources has been a hot topic now for some time. Political careers have floundered and others have been made on this very issue. We are often told that here in Australia, comparatively speaking we emit so little that our efforts to limit greenhouse gas emissions don't really matter. I think this is to miss the point completely. Unfortunately, our gospel reading today has a piece missing from it. The Kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, the smallest of seeds, which grows into the greatest of trees. Our efforts in protecting the environment need to be seen in the same light.

In the pew sheet last week, I suggested that Jesus might be an environmental scientist. It was a little tongue-in-cheek, but if we are convinced that Jesus is alive is indeed among us in the Church, his body, then of course he will manifest in all manner of folk. He is indeed manifest in every single one of us when we reach beyond ourselves and our own concerns to engage with the concerns of those around us and to the environment, which sustains us all. We cannot separate our care for each other and our care for the environment. If modern science has taught us anything it is the interconnectedness of all living things. The scriptures, on one level, know nothing of the environmental issues of our time, but there is very deep wisdom which can draw upon to help us understand our calling as stewards of creation.

We are a little shy today in speaking about heaven. It is strange that those who talk most about heaven are those who want little or nothing to do with the church. Dare I say there is a great deal of wishy washy sentimentalism when it comes to heaven. I read once that Neveah was the most popular girls' name in America ... heaven backwards! I think much of this thinking about heaven is derived from a selection of texts that are often dream-like or visions, much like Jacob's. But I think the Biblical tradition has so much more to say that is pertinent

to us. Heaven is much more earthbound than perhaps we imagine. Jesus speaks of the Kingdom of Heaven in the parables as we heard this morning. They are very earthy and speak of things that we can relate to. I think is the best way to approach our understanding of heaven.

Heaven is something that we can grasp on one level, but on another it's beyond us. It is here, but not quite; heaven has been inaugurated, but its fulfilment is yet to come. Part of our issue as finite beings is that we are limited by space and time and therefore we cannot grasp fully matters of the infinite or of eternity, they are beyond us. Now that Doctor Who is to be reincarnated as a woman all will well in that regard I'm sure. A 'Time Lady' will sort out the space-time continuum! I digress! Yet I think that when St Paul speaks of the creation being in bondage to decay he means that it is subject to time; as we all are. But that decay is hastened by our poor stewardship of creation.

The Parable of the Weeds, indeed Jesus' teaching, suggests that the Kingdom of Heaven is already here but is being stifled. The weeds, the evils that beset humanity, our greed, our exploitation of creation, our struggling faith prevent its revelation. Paul is steeped in the Old Testament; in that tradition, the created order is intimately bound up with the fate of human beings. God gives stewardship of the earth to humanity—Adam and Eve—but their fall from grace means that the earth too struggles. The opposite is also the case—salvation is bound up with a flourishing environment.

So, heaven is something we can indeed see and glimpse, and find joy in even now, though only partially. In its fullness, it is the renewed creation, everything in perfect harmony; this is heaven. We need not be shy in striving for it, we are on pilgrimage towards it, the gate of heaven. Yes, it is beyond the time and space we are bound by. Yes, our efforts seem miniscule when faced with the enormity of the journey, but we called to listen and hear the cry, the groan for salvation and respond now. Amen.