

2nd Sunday before Lent

7 February 2021

Psalm 104, 26-end; Proverbs 8, 1&22-31; John 1,1-14

I was with Christina my wife and the Australian friend we'd been staying with, in a bus on Fraser Island – a large sand island off the coast of Queensland. We were on the island's one main road – the beach, a wide sand beach 70 miles long. The bus had done about half of it when there was a shout 'WHALES!' And there, really close to the shore, with those unmistakable fins, were two hump-back whales doing their exhibition stuff – leaping skywards clear of the water, then crashing down with a great thwack and eruption of foam. We all tumbled out of the bus, right to the water's edge, and yes! there was also a calf, doing its little best to imitate those leaps and splashes. It was clearly a family group, not feeding or fighting or mating – but clearly, simply *playing*.

I'll come back to the whales, but for now let's turn to our Gospel reading - so different from the Psalm or the Proverbs passage with their celebration of the glorious particulars of creation. John Ch.1 we know as the *Christmas* reading, the key passage about the Incarnation: why now? Well, you may recall last Sunday being described as a turning point in the church year – Christmas at our backs, the cross ahead of us, so to speak. As Jesus was presented in the temple, old Simeon recognized the longed-for Messiah, and rejoiced at 'the light to lighten the gentiles and the glory of God's people Israel.' But there's a dark side – he went on to warn that this Messiah was a sign that will be opposed, rejected, and that his mother's soul will be pierced with a sword of grief.

John's Gospel prelude too is full of wonder, and also has a dark side. The wonder here is not at God's manifold works, but at God revealing himself in a human being: human nature not obscuring God's nature, but being the medium for revealing it! But this miraculous revelation too has a reverse side: the world in general and God's own people in particular did not recognize Christ – let alone accept him. So – 'God-with-us' reassuringly behind us, Good Friday and the cross ahead. Turning point complete.

The main message of John is full of hope. The true light, which lightens everyone, is come into the world; the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it. An apt message for our time. And there are signs that the glory of God's creation is becoming more appreciated – in the lockdown urban parks are more used than ever, garden birds are more noticed. Even foxes; they do have some *very* tiresome habits, but seeing the dog-fox tightly curled asleep in my garden, his fur coat glowing in the sunlight and his 'partner' just a few paces off...I could forgive the night-time noises and morning doorstep presents. Perhaps there will be cubs playing soon. And so back to the playful whales.

That verse about Leviathan in the psalm: it's translated from the Hebrew in different ways. Most give the sense of '...there is the sea and there is that Leviathan God formed to sport in it', or 'formed to play, or to *frolic* there' (I like that one). It's Leviathan that has the fun. But other translations turn it round – it's for *God's* fun in creating! So '...Leviathan...that you have made *for the sport of it*'; and even, in the Jerusalem Bible...'that you have made to amuse you.' As though God was bored with all those

little fishes, and amusing himself by making a *really* big one. It seems the Hebrew original is ambiguous, expressing *either* the playful delight of the creature he has made, or God's delight in creating it. Or both – a deliberate ambivalence. A streak of playfulness not only in the created beings, but in the nature of the Creator himself. (Semitic languages tend to be more allusive than ours – words have wider associations, rather than tight dictionary definitions. Or so I'm told. It's what makes Arabic such a good language for poetry.)

'Leviathan' crops up quite often in the OT, under various names – the great sea-monster, the dragon, Rahab. All these are undisguised relics of Canaanite mythology – the chaos-monster which the god had to vanquish so as to bring order for creation. *Very* different from Genesis 1 (God spoke, and it was so...). The Psalmist is clear – Leviathan is put in its place in God's creation, not as an enemy to be destroyed, but as a playful family creature, pleasing to God. 'God saw all that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.' The Perfect Planet, with inspiring and frightening pictures, and commentary by David Attenborough.

Ah! There's the rub. We may well feel our planet is not entirely perfect, but it certainly had reached a remarkable equilibrium for such a complex system. Now its main threat to that equilibrium is not catastrophic volcanic action, nor collision with an asteroid big enough to cause world-wide damage. It is the behaviour of us humans. Not intentionally harmful; not any one action to blame. It's the sum total of little things, like what we eat, and the world failure to prevent big things like destruction of the Amazon forest, or phasing out coal-fired power stations.

And for us in particular, there's the motivator of knowing that this is *God's* world; God's wisdom has shaped it from the beginning, and we are privileged to be entrusted with it for the time of our generation. As a contributor to the Perfect Planet broadcast put it: what she fears is having children growing up in an increasingly impossible world and asking us 'Why didn't you do something while there was still time?'

While there *is* still time – just.

Harold Stringer