

## **A Biblical View of the Ecological Crises (4): Resurrection**

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

July 26, 2009

A sermon preached in Glebe Presbyterian Church

Toronto, Ontario

Isaiah 52:13 – 53: 13

Philippians 2: 1-11

John 10: 7-19

The ecological crises are caused by human beings fouling their own nest: destroying the ecosystems in which we live and on which we rely in order to keep on living. It is the height of folly; the height of stupidity; the ultimate death wish. Why do we do it? We do it, I think because we are afraid: afraid of losing out in the great game of life; afraid of someone else achieving more than we have achieved; afraid of being poor; afraid of dying perhaps. And so we continue to push ourselves around the downward spiral of futility that marks our days.

Our struggle to excel, to get to the top of something is deeply embedded in our DNA and replicated in the rest of creation by the struggle of other species to survive. We call it natural selection or survival of the fittest. Eat or be eaten. Predators and prey in mortal combat. The winners on either side of the conflict get to procreate and give birth to the next generation when the battle will be renewed. Weaker specimens are culled out by this process of natural selection and the species is improved. We believe that the human species is the final result of millions of years of culling and improving. We have finally reached the top of the ladder. No species can threaten us anymore. We can now stop the eternal struggle to destroy our former enemies but we can't seem to find the "off" button. And so we continue with our aggressive behaviour against everything we don't like until the very ecosystems that permit us to live are threatened.

In last week's sermon about Jesus' life we learned that Jesus taught us to stop hating our former enemies and treat them as our neighbours. I suggested that we needed to expand our ideas about neighbours to include all the elements of the ecosystems that sustain us. If we can do that then we will begin to care to other species as intensely as we care for ourselves. And that will break our instinct to attack, to dominate and to kill, tame or transform anything that is different from ourselves. But this instinct to dominate is deeply imbedded in our souls. Everything we ever knew is pushing us in the opposite direction. So when Jesus came along and told the world to stop hating and start loving, the world rejected his teachings. First, the powers of the day attacked him, tried to silence him or sideline him. And when that didn't work they killed him. They saw his teachings as a threat and so they got rid of him. That's how the evolutionary process works. That is what survival of the fittest is all about after all. Anyone who threatens you or your ideas must be eliminated. So plants that grow faster than other plants and crowd them out survive; and animals that are faster, stronger or smarter than their competitors survive. That's why we seek power in human organizations. That is the genius of natural selection.

Jesus pointed us in another way, and anticipated the day when the human creature would be so strong and so well organized that our antisocial instincts towards the rest of creation would actually be dangerous. When you threaten the powerful by suggesting that they give up their power, they won't like it and they will use the power they have over you to destroy you, and that's what the religious and political authorities of Jesus' day tried to do. Amazingly though, they failed, because this man and his teachings don't seem to have died out at all. Most

of us have forgotten the names of the great and powerful people of Jesus' day and even for those of us who can name a few Roman emperors, our memories of them are little more than names in a history book. But Jesus and his teachings live on. This is the great counter-example of the theory of natural selection because in this case it seems that the weak has prevailed over the strong; the vanquished is still with us long after the victors and their empires have disappeared. The message to love your enemies is still out there. Most of us don't listen to it of course, because we still believe in the survival of the fittest and our need to triumph over our enemies, but all that means is that we too will follow the Roman emperors and the High Priests into oblivion. We are called to follow a different road, and if we do then we will anticipate the behaviour of the human species that we must adopt if we are going to survive. However, whatever we do, the man of Galilee will live on.

Something very important is going on here. The tide of evolution is changing direction for humans. Jesus anticipated this change 2000 years ago and he seems to have tapped into powers that are even greater than the powers that tried to destroy him and his teachings. It seems that the world was created in such a way that the species that finally gets to the top of the evolutionary pyramid has to learn to stop using the powers that got us there or we will destroy ourselves and much of the rest of the world with us. The evolutionary struggle will continue with the rest of life of course, but we humans have to discover the life-saving power that comes from sacrificing ourselves and serving others. Perhaps this is our unique role as the species made in the image of God. Perhaps if we can do that we will finally become the creatures that God has always intended us to be; perhaps we will become more like Jesus, God's eternal gift to the world.

The feeling that Jesus lived on even after he was crucified was so intense with the disciples and those who knew him best that they claimed that he had actually risen from the dead. But that is so contrary to the way we think that the world works that this claim makes no sense to us at all. For us death continues to be the great monster, the great predator in our lives, the one thing that can destroy all our plans, all our dreams. We have evolved so much, conquered so much, killed so much, but this one great monster continues to haunt all our days. So to claim that this one man, this weak, poor, ultimately defenceless victim of our civilisation could conquer everything that threatens us, everything that we fear most, well it seem unbelievable, even ridiculous.

At the same time though when we face the facts, we can't deny that his influence over our lives continues. Here we are today, coming together once again to try to make some sense out of this man's teachings and this man's life. We are witnesses to the reality that in some ways at least, the man of Galilee still lives among us.

By teaching us that we must now love our enemies, Jesus is saying that the human being has now outgrown the survival of the fittest game that we have been playing with the rest of creation since life began on the earth. We are now so strong that we can not only sweep all our opponent's pieces from the chess board of life, but in so doing we can destroy the chess board as well. Our power to control and to kill has now exceeded our power to forgive and to love those who would hurt and destroy us. Jesus represents the new improved version of the human species, one that has successfully put aside the destructive game of natural selection that we human creatures no longer need to play. We are called to follow him so that we can also become this new species of human that loves and nurtures those whose instincts remain destructive towards us. Our instincts tell us that this is a crazy thing to do: if you love your enemies you will play into their hands and they will take advantage of us and do us as much harm as they can. However, the message of the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is that after our enemies have done their worst, even crucified us, we will continue to live.

As the ecological crises deepens in our day, the human creature will continue to be challenged to back off from our destructive acts in the world. Our standard of living will have to fall, while other creatures recover and

reclaim their living space. Every cell of our DNA will scream that this is a mistake, the wrong thing to do, but we must put aside these instincts; they are out of date; we can no longer afford to follow them. One example before us is Jesus, the ultimate teacher but also the ultimate victim. By following his own teachings to love his enemies, he put himself in their power and was killed by them. In the normal rules of natural selection, death and the failure to reproduce is the worst thing that can happen. All the prophecies of the Messiah in the Old Testament proclaimed that the anointed one of God would restore the throne of his ancestor David and he would reign forever and ever. A crucified Messiah was a joke, and a contradiction in terms. And yet, in so many ways this anti-Messiah continues to live among us. We come together to worship him, to study his teachings, to pray to our God in his name and with his words. That's the power of everlasting life that apparently comes from loving your neighbours and washing their feet. On the other hand the Roman Empire is gone, and its leaders are no more than postscripts in history books. That apparently is what you get for achieving power and greatness over others. Today and every day we decide which way we will go, what will control our lives. Will it be the kingdom of Caesar or the kingdom of God. We are called to follow the man from Galilee. We are promised newness of life by loving God and loving our neighbour, where our neighbour now includes all the creatures in our common ecosystem. That is the nature of Christian hope in our day. I will have more to say about that next week.

One of the earliest and for my money one of the best understandings of the nature of Jesus the Christ comes from the ancient song in Philippians 2 which we read together a few minutes ago. I find it remarkable that a hymn written only a few years after Jesus' death could capture the essence of Jesus' teachings so well. When we look at these words through the reality of the ecological crises in our day these teachings take on different and even deeper meanings than before. Listen now as I read them again:

Phil. 2: 1-11