

Blessing of the animals

Genesis 1:24-31

Matthew 6: 25-33

(My mum was born on St Francis Day, 4th October, her birthday was this week. The morning she died, a currawong sang outside her room in intensive care at the hospital. When we later visited her seat in the botanic gardens, a currawong came up to us and sang again, a sign, we thought..)

‘God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.’

Yesterday morning early as I was walking by the water at Raymond Island, I watched two black swans tipped over, feet in the air, heads underwater looking for food. I came across a grazing kangaroo and had a conversation. I saw a koala curled up on a low branch of a tree. The night before I had seen a film about Saint Francis and Saint Clare, two people seeking to follow Jesus in a very literal way. They embraced lady poverty and sought to rebuild the church literally at first and to care for the poor.

As I walked, I was thinking about what I might say today.

We are part of the animal world. Other animals are not separate from us. We are all God’s beloved creatures. And God speaks to us through the rest of God’s creation. We only need to look, to listen and to learn.

Our cat Jacque taught me so much. From Jacque learned to sit still for longer. I learned to stretch. I learned to love unconditionally in a very different way. I do miss him. And since Jacque died, I notice I have been home less often, I have been a little more frenetic perhaps..not good.

Animals in their presence can speak to me about God. They have no anxieties about the future as far as I know, and they don't reflect on the past, as far as I know. They are present, they love unconditionally in their own way.

Pope Francis in his encyclical 'Laudate Si' or 'praise be to you', said many wonderful things, but here is a taste of his words: He said,

Everything God creates is a reflection of God. God loves it.

Each creature is a place of Divine presence.

Everything is a caress of God.

Each creature is a word of God to human beings.

We are one interrelated community before God.

We are part of nature, included in it, not separate.

All creatures have value in themselves, intrinsic value.

Why? God is present in each of them. God loves them. Each of them has a future in God.

Creation is a kind of revelation, a manifestation of God. A book of God alongside the book of Scripture.

Nature speaks a word of love to us.

We are called to an ecological conversion and generous care, full of tenderness for all creation. We are part of a splendid universal communion.
Says Pope Francis.

The patron saint of animals, St. Francis of Assisi, built bonds of love with all of the kinds of creatures in the animal kingdom. But Saint Francis had a special relationship with birds, who often followed him around and rested on his shoulders, arms, or hands as he prayed or walked around outside. Birds often symbolize spiritual freedom and growth, so some believers think that the miracle of the birds listening intently to Francis' message was sent by God to encourage Francis and his fellow monks to continue their work preaching the Gospel message of Jesus Christ, which focuses on how people can become spiritually free and grow closer to God.

Here's the story of the famous bird sermon that Francis preached one day:

As Francis and some companions were traveling through the Spoleto Valley in Italy, Francis noticed that a huge flock of birds had gathered in some trees beside a field. Francis noticed that the birds were watching him as if they were expecting something. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, he decided to preach a sermon about God's love to them.

Francis walked over to a spot beside the trees and began an impromptu sermon, reported the monks who were traveling with Francis and wrote down what Francis said. Their report was later published in the ancient book *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*.

"My sweet little sisters, birds of the sky," Francis said, "you are bound to heaven, to God, your Creator. In every beat of your wings and every note of your songs, praise him.

He has given you the greatest of gifts, the freedom of the air. You neither sow, nor reap, yet God provides for you the most delicious food, rivers, and lakes to quench your thirst, mountains, and valleys for your home, tall trees to build your nests, and the most beautiful clothing: a change of feathers with every season.

You and your kind were preserved in Noah's Ark. Clearly, our Creator loves you dearly, since he gives you gifts so abundantly. So please beware, my little sisters, of the sin of ingratitude, and always sing praise to God."

The monks who recorded Francis' sermon to the birds wrote that the birds listened intently to everything Francis had to say: "While Francis said these words, all those birds began to open their beaks, and stretch out their necks, and spread their wings, and bend their heads reverently toward the

earth, and with acts and songs, they showed that the holy father [Francis] gave them great pleasure."

Francis "rejoiced" at the birds' response, the monks wrote, and "wondered much at such a multitude of birds and at their beauty and at their attention and tameness, and he devoutly thanked God for them." The birds remained attentively gathered around Francis, the story goes, until he blessed them and they flew away -- some heading north, some south, some east, and some west -- going out in all directions as if on their way to pass along the good news of God's love that they had just heard to other creatures.¹

An animal's presence can change our focus, can draw us in, and can lead us back to the heaven of the present moment.

St. Francis preached to human beings as well as to birds and he showed in his lifestyle a serious and radical commitment to the imitation of Christ. For him, following Christ meant trying to live exactly as Jesus and his disciples did. He demanded of his followers that they own no property whatsoever.

One of his slogans was: "naked to follow the naked Christ." He took that quite literally. One of the key moments in his story is that when he renounced his share of his family's wealth and threw himself on the

¹ <https://www.thoughtco.com/saint-francis-assisi-sermon-to-birds-124321>

mercy of the church, he stripped nude in the city square of Assisi in front of his parents and the bishop.

Our animals also teach us that simplicity. The blessing of the animals at 10am is one small way to acknowledge the important role pets play in many of our lives, as teachers, and revealers of God's love. Some people have closer and deeper relationships with their pets than they have with other humans, so it's appropriate to bring our pets, or their photos with us to church at least once a year, and on that day, to ask God's blessing on them and on our relationships with them.

To acknowledge the role our pets play in our lives is also to acknowledge our full humanity, in all of its messiness and unseemliness. And if there's anything that St. Francis was about, it was that. His ministry was among the poor and the downtrodden. He and his followers sought to help those who were sick and dying and he brought the gospel to places it was rarely heard or experienced. His life was preaching the gospel. As is often attributed to him, he said, "preach the gospel, if you have to, use words."

Our animals remind us that our relationship with God is not just about us and God. It includes all of creation. Creation proclaims the glory and love of God and in an age of climate change and environmental degradation, to see our responsibility

to the earth, and all God's creatures as part of what it means to follow Jesus, may be the most important thing of all.

Susanna

'Francis rebuild my church which, as you see
Is falling into ruin.' From the cross
Your saviour spoke to you and speaks to us
Again through you. Undoing set you free,
Loosened the traps of trappings, cast away
The trammelling of all that costly cloth
We wind our saviour in. At break of day
He set aside his grave-clothes. Your new birth
Came like a daybreak too, naked and true
To poverty and to the gospel call,
You woke to Christ and Christ awoke in you
And set to work through all your love and skill
To make our ruin good, to bless and heal
To wake the Christ in us and make us whole.
Malcolm Guite