Pet Service for Hanwood, Longden and Annscroft with Pulverbatch September 2021

Revd Emma Phillips

This morning we are part of a great tradition of Christian care for animals – which goes all the way back to the Jewish commandments for the Sabbath, which instructed the people to give the beasts of burden a rest day as well as the people. Christians have been at the forefront of shaping the way we relate to animals. St Francis of Assisi in the 13th century taught his followers to call all animals ‘brothers and sisters’ – in a famous incident he tamed the wolf at Gubbio who was terrorising the town by praying for it, and got the townspeople to feed it instead.

The RSPCA was founded in 1894 by Rev Arthur Broome with a group of other Victorian moral crusaders. This was a sacrificial move for Rev Broome, as he gave up his London church to work, unpaid, full time for the charity, and even ended up in prison for the charity’s debts. The RSPCA became the first national charity for animal welfare, at a time when animals were often regarded as without feelings, objects to own rather than creatures with lives of their own.

There is a great tradition of vicar naturalists, perhaps the most famous of whom was Gilbert White, born 1720. White was in many ways the founding father of ecology – he studied animals and plants in the field rather than in the lab, realising that every creature had a part to play. He said, right back in 1770: 'Earthworms, though in appearance a small and despicable link in the chain of nature, yet, if lost, would make a lamentable chasm. Worms seem to be the great promoters of vegetation, which would proceed but lamely without them.'

These writers did not suffer from the modern need to separate out science from faith. They saw God’s presence spelled out in the natural world around them. Christopher Smart was a great poet and ardent Christian, and he wrote evocatively in 1739:

‘For I will consider my Cat Jeoffry.

For he is the servant of the Living God duly and daily serving him.

For at the first glance of the glory of God in the East he worships in his way.

For this is done by wreathing his body seven times round with elegant quickness.

For then he leaps up to catch the musk, which is the blessing of God upon his prayer.

For he rolls upon prank to work it in’.

I’m sure that any of you who have watched a cat can easily visualise the poet’s words – and maybe you have seen how your pet gives glory to God just in their enjoyment of life.

Today though we may think of seeing God in our pets, and the wider world of nature around us, as a bit sentimental, rather a frivolous application of Christianity. Today’s reading makes it very clear that this is not so. This is the second account of creation from the beginning of the Bible, and it is not intended to be a factual account, but a blueprint for God’s purposes – the why rather than the how. God creates the first human from the ground. We are not separate from the rest of creation, parachuted in, to use and abuse. We are an intrinsic part of the natural world. And it was a great and wonderful world that Adam was introduced to – a bountiful creation that was unbelievably beautiful, and would provide for all his needs. Adam was created with a purpose: he was set in the world to work the ground and keep it in order. He was a gardener and a farmer from the word go. God’s first role for us is that we should be stewards of his wonderful world. His next commission for the first man was to name the creatures.

Naming things gives them value, honours their individual nature. Graham and I very much enjoy birdwatching, not to make lists of birds but to identify them – to notice the little details that make each sort special. We get very excited when we see something we haven’t seen before – something else for us to name. When you give a name to a creature you are recognising its uniqueness. We name each of our pets at the beginning of our relationship with them – we go from thinking about dogs, or cats, in general, to knowing our own particular pet by name, precious and beloved. God entrusts us with the whole of creation in this specific way.

In the reading I have missed out a chunk, when God puts the tree of good and evil in the middle of the garden. We could wonder whether God was just asking for trouble – to create a beautiful garden full of delicious fruits only to put up a notice saying ‘don’t eat this one?’ But that would be to take the story too literally – the tree is simply a way of saying that God created human beings with the capacity to choose between right and wrong – in other words we are free. Now the house martins that nest on my house seem to epitomise freedom – they whirl and swirl around in the sky, and then when winter comes they head off for sunnier climes – how nice for them, we could say! No responsibilities, they do what they like! Or do they? You know something odd – the older martins will leave a week or so before the new generation, who stay to get a bit bigger and fatter before their epic journey. Which means that they fly all that way to the African side of the Med without any guidance at all – it is all instinct, hard wired. They don’t really enjoy freedom as we do – almost everything they do is programmed into them by their genetic heritage. The command in the Garden of Eden proclaims that humans are different – we can choose. When it comes to caring for animals, we do have the freedom to make the right choices, to take responsibility for their welfare, and to protect them from cruelty.

We still need to pay attention to the end of our gospel passage if we are to avoid getting sentimental - the animals were not the ultimate companions that Man needed. We can’t retreat from the world of humanity to find God only in nature. People may be cruel and violent, capable of acts that animals would never commit, but it is a human that God came to be amongst us. It is through each one of us that all creation is to be made new. St Paul says in Romans 8 ‘The created world itself can hardly wait for what’s coming next. Everything in creation is being more or less held back. God reins it in until both creation and all the creatures are ready and can be released at the same moment into the glorious times ahead.’

So though we cannot yet see the time when all of creation is in harmony, we certainly can work together for that day. We can read God’s love in creation and in in particular in the lives of the animals he has given us to care for, and we can work together to make this world a better place for the plants and animals he has entrusted into our stewardship.

I’m going to finish with the words of Meister Eckhart, a 13th century Christian mystic – which I hope will make you smile! He tells us to

‘Apprehend God in all things,

for God is in all things.

Every single creature is full of God,

and is a book about God.

Every creature is a word of God.

If I spent enough time with the tiniest creature-

even a caterpillar-

I would never have to prepare a sermon

so full of God

is every creature’