

Sermon delivered by
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The Blessing of the Animals
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May the Lord be in our hearts and on my lips, that I may proclaim the Gospel worthily and well, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

Today, will be a slightly different kind of church service. There may be a little bit more noise than usual, a bark here and there, some restless movement, and perhaps even the occasional animal that has absolutely no interest in what I'm saying. And maybe that is entirely as it should be, because perhaps, one of the problems with church is that we have made it an entirely human affair.

We talk about Gods relationship with us, his love for us, his salvation and his purpose for us. And without really meaning to, we can begin to imagine that the whole story about creation is about us people.

But if you read Genesis 1, really read it slowly and out loud, we find that Genesis 1 interrupts this. "And God said, Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky". And suddenly the world is alive with life, the oceans teem with creatures, the sky fills with wings, the earth begins to move and crawl and breath. And God looks upon this extraordinary abundance of life and saw: That IT WAS GOOD.

For much of Christian history, Genesis 1 has been interpreted through the idea that humans have been given dominion over

creation. And the word, *dominion*, has been used to justify the belief that everything exists for our purposes.

Yet I wonder whether we've confused responsibility with ownership. The creation story was not written as a modern scientific account of how life began. It emerged from an ancient world with very different understandings of the universe. Its theological significance lies partly in what it says about the character of God and the goodness of the world.

In Genesis, creation is not the result of a battle between competing gods, like in some ancient Near Eastern traditions. It is portrayed as an ordered, life-giving expression of divine intention.

And what strikes me is the repeated declaration that creation is good. Goodness is already present before humanity appears.

This challenges our assumption that humans are the measure of everything. We are part of creation, but we are not its sole purpose. And if we take this seriously, it raises some uncomfortable questions.

What does it mean when entire species disappear because of our human activity?

What does it say about our understanding of God's creation when forests are destroyed, waterways polluted and animals treated as though their suffering doesn't matter?

These are not simply environmental questions. These are theological questions. They concern what we believe about God, about life, and about our responsibility to the world we inhabit.

I don't think Genesis 1 gives us a straightforward answer to every environmental issue. But Genesis 1 does challenge us to reconsider the assumptions with which we approach them. And perhaps one of the assumptions is that we have the right to determine the value of everything and in the process, destroy the beautiful world God has created.

The biblical scholar Richard Bauckham explores this beautifully in his book *“Living with Other Creatures”*. Bauckham challenges the way Christians have sometimes interpreted Genesis, particularly the idea that humanity has been given dominion over the earth. We have imagined ourselves standing above creation, with the rest of the natural world placed beneath us. But Bauckham asks us to read the whole biblical story rather than allowing one interpretation of dominion to determine our relationship with earth.

Bauckham develops the idea of what he calls the community of creation. Human beings are not separate from the rest of creation. We are fellow members of a much larger community of life. This changes the way we understand our place in the world. We are not owners standing outside creation. We are creatures living within it. And while humanity has responsibilities, these responsibilities do not make the rest of creation less valuable.

In fact, they make us more accountable for how we treat it. There is a big difference between having power over something and having responsibility towards it. And perhaps Christianity has not always understood the difference very well.

This now brings us to St Francis of Assisi, the Saint whose feast day, we celebrate on the 4th of October each year. We often picture a gentle man surrounded by birds and animals. He has become the gentle patron saint of creatures great and small. But there is something more radical about his understanding of creation.

St Francis came to see creation as a family of beings, sharing a common source in God. In his *Canticle of the Creatures*, he speaks of Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Brother Wind and Sister Water. Now, we might find this language poetic. But I think Francis was expressing something quite radical. He was challenging the idea that us humans stand apart from the rest of creation, looking down upon it as something to possess or control.

Instead, he understood himself as belonging within creation, like a family, with human beings as siblings with all creatures. Because everything – from a human being to a humble earth worm flows from the same creative love of God.

And that changes the way we understand our relationship with the world. Because we tend to treat things differently when we regard them as belonging to our family. We become less concerned with what we can take and more attentive as to how we can live together.

And that brings us to today

Today we gather to bless the animals who share our lives.

Some of them are wonderfully affectionate. Others are independent, stubborn, noisy or occasionally destructive. And those of us who have loved an animal know that the relationship can be surprisingly deep.

Animals have a way of drawing us out of ourselves. They depend upon us, but we also learn from them. We learn patience, we are comforted; we learn about trust. And we learn about what unconditional loves really means.

But I wonder whether the blessing of animals is about something more than celebrating the affection we feel for our pets. Because if we bless only those creatures, we find lovable, we may have missed something important. The goodness of creation extends beyond the animals we welcome into our homes. It includes the creatures we fear, the insects we find irritating, the snakes we are petrified of, and the species we may never encounter. It includes forms of life that have no obvious benefit to us at all. And I think that takes us closer to what St Francis was trying to express.

We do not have to understand or appreciate every living creature for its existence to matter. Perhaps the real significance of today's blessing is that it reminds us of our place within a much larger community of life. We are not standing above creation, generously offering God's blessing to the animals beneath us. We are standing alongside them, recognising that we, too, depend upon the same generosity of life. And perhaps, in blessing them, we are also

acknowledging how much we must learn: about humility, about interdependence and about living with other creatures without always needing to control them.

And perhaps that is where today's reading leaves us. With the recognition that we belong to something far greater than ourselves. A world filled with life, complexity, beauty and mystery.

A world that, according to Genesis 1, God looked upon and called good long before anyone was there to claim it as their own. And maybe our task is not to decide which parts of creation deserve our care. Maybe it is to learn how to live as though it all matters.

Amen.

