

ANIMAL WELFARE SUNDAY

Psalms 148; Colossians 1:15-23; Luke 4: 14-21

Sermon by Penny Evans, preached on 4th October 2020

I wonder what emotions you bring with you today? Resentment or sadness over the restrictions caused by the pandemic? Anger at an injustice? Disappointment or loss? Or maybe you're feeling more positive, at peace, pleased with a success, or grateful for the beauty of the natural world?

Turn to the Psalms and you'll find every conceivable emotion; every possible aspect of life brought into relationship with God. The Psalm I've chosen for today focuses on wonder, praise and thanksgiving.....the whole creation, including humans, sharing a fundamental commonality: *'for he commanded and they were created'* sings the Psalmist.

The call for all creation to praise God is by no means unique to the psalms. We find it in the wisdom literature - Job, Ecclesiastes, Proverbs - and in the creation narratives at the beginning of Genesis. We find it in the covenant following the flood made not just with humans but with *'every living creature'*. We find it in the prophets who look forward to a time when all creatures will dwell peaceably together. We find it in the words of Jesus: not a single sparrow is forgotten by God; and look to the birds and lilies for models of good discipleship. Paul's understanding which we've just heard in our reading from Colossians, is nothing short of cosmic: the good news will be preached to every creature under heaven, which echoes Jesus' command to us at the end of Mark; and through Jesus all things in heaven and on earth will be reconciled.

God's love for the whole created order is indisputably a key theme running through the Biblical texts. I have no doubt from my reading of scripture that Jesus' life, death and resurrection — the good news for a broken world — is not just for me, not just for humankind, but for all creation. This idea of 'cosmic reconciliation' reminds us that we're not the only creatures of importance to God, that non-human parts of creation are not disposable commodities to be used and discarded as we wish, but precious recipients of God's grace.

How are we to respond? Well celebrating Animal Welfare Sunday is a good place to start, a Sunday which has been deliberately designated to coincide with the Sunday nearest to the feast day of St Francis, patron saint of animals, the environment, and ecology. St Francis famously spoke of all parts of creation as his brothers and sisters, and he reputedly followed Jesus' final command to preach to all creation by proclaiming the gospel to a flock of birds.

Given my limited experience communicating with Coco the cat and Mollie the dog, both selective listeners even on a good day, I'm not sure that preaching as such is the most effective way to communicate to the whole of creation.So what does it mean to proclaim the gospel to the whole creation? Well to start with we'll want to join the psalmist in praising God's creation, its beauty, intricacy and diversity; but we must also sound a second note, and acknowledge how far we've strayed from God's vision for the created world. God calls us to repentance, to seek out new patterns of life in response to God's grace, patterns that reduce our devastating impacts on our fellow creatures.

Issues of animal welfare seem to have taken a back seat in the church in recent decades, but of course we now know that poverty, racism, and now pandemics, are inextricably tied up with how we humans relate to the natural world, and so it's a Christian imperative to address these issues – and urgently! We can manage our outdoor spaces by avoiding pesticides and encouraging bees, insects and other small animals; we can care for our pets, support charities that look after the huge numbers of abandoned dogs and cats; we can campaign against animal injustices and cruelties and the loss of vital habitats across the world.

But we can't avoid any longer the elephant in the room: the need to change our diets, reduce meat consumption, avoid altogether cheap meat, eggs and dairy. Here's a statistic¹: 96% of mammals on the planet are either humans or livestock reared for human consumption. 96%!!! Wild mammals now only make up 4%. Our eating patterns are putting huge strain on the world's natural resources and squeezing wild animals into extinction. Around 2 out of every 3 farm animals are factory farmed² – that's a huge number of animals being kept in stressful and extreme confinement! And for what benefit? For every 100 food calories of edible crops fed to livestock, we get back just 17 calories in the form of meat and dairy; that's an 83% loss³. We prioritize farm animals over edible crops that could feed far more people.

This is a justice issue, as much about people as it is about animals: it's the poor who are forced to work in low-skilled dangerous poorly paid contexts - abattoirs, farms, meat-packing factories; it's the poor who are disproportionately affected by loss of land (for livestock and for their feed) – very often indigenous people; it's the poor who suffer most from disease, climate change, and polluted air and water.

Pope John Paul II said of Saint Francis that he *"gives us striking witness that when we are at peace with God we are better able to devote ourselves to building up that peace with all creation which is inseparable from peace among all peoples."* Peace with God, with creation and with people, all inextricably connected. I think about this in relationship to the way in which animals, the environment, human workers, human rights and our own bodies are treated in our current intensive farming systems. I think about how industrial agriculture is contrary to the values of my faith.

God calls us to grace, mercy, gentleness and peace. A right relationship with God is contrary to a system that says that every life must turn a profit, that even creation is a commodity. We cannot end the groaning of creation, but we can attend to it, and respond by doing what we can to reduce our part in worsening the lot of our fellow creatures, who surely are today to be included among the poor, the captives, the oppressed.

As we leave this time of worship together, may we be thankful to God for the rich blessings of creation, and may we commit ourselves to taking actions in partnership with God that will help all our brothers and sisters, both animals and people, to truly flourish.

¹ Yinon M. Bar-On and Ron Milo, published 2018, in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* – drawing on hundreds of global and local studies from recent decades. <https://www.greenpeace.org/international/story/17788/how-much-of-earths-biomass-is-affected-by-humans/>

² <https://www.ciwf.org.uk/factory-farming/>

³ PJ Stevenson 'Industrial Livestock Production: The Twin Myths of Efficiency and Necessity' <https://www.ciwf.org.uk/media/7425974/industrial-livestock-production-the-twin-myths-of-efficiency-and-necessity.pdf>

Amen.