

Animal Blessing Service Reflections for Matawhero 29 September 2019

1. St Francis and the Animals

Francis was a man who lived 800 years ago in Italy, in a place called Assisi. He would have loved to meet all the animals here today.

Francis loved animals and he loved everything about the world around him - except for the way he saw people treating each other and animals badly. The song we sang about all creatures praising God together was written by St Francis eight hundred years ago. Francis talked about the sun and moon as his brother and sister. That was part of his song we sang. Francis felt at one with the natural world – he knew he was part of nature. Yet Francis was also really concerned about how people treated the world and the animals within it. We might say he was an early champion of animal welfare and a conservationist.

Francis wanted to bring peace to the world and to bring love in places where he saw hatred. His devotion to God was expressed through his love for all of God's creation and the way in which he cared for animals and plants. There are stories about Francis talking to the animals as if they were his special friends. There are many paintings of Francis with animals. Indeed we have one of those pictures on the front of the service sheet today. Francis was made a saint by the Catholic Church so in that picture he has a halo – which is the Catholic sign for someone holy. Francis was a great example to those around him.

Because Francis lived in a rural part of Italy he did not have the opportunity to see all the animals of the world but he cared for every animal and bird he did see.

Most of you will have seen an elephant, but I doubt that Francis ever did. We are going to sing a song about animals appreciating who they are. The words of each verse tell us about special things that animals can do but also about special things that we can do that animals can't.

Maybe you have sometimes thought that you would like to have a trunk like an elephant that you could wave in the air or reach out for things far away or high up. For vertically challenged people like me that could be quite useful. Or maybe you have sometimes thought that it would be helpful to have a tail like a monkey, so you could swing from one tree to another. The song tells us that instead of wishing we could be different, we can thank God for who we are and the things that we can do.

Sing: I've never seen an elephant

Now we are going to share in a reading from Psalm 8 which is one of the Creation stories in the Bible. **New Zealand version of Psalm 8**

God, you are our amazing Lord.
Your greatness is seen in all the world.
Children know this and grow strong.
You are the joy of the universe.
When we look at the sky which you have made
And the moon and the stars which you set in place,
Then we can't help wondering "why do you care about us humans?"
Why do we matter to you?"
You have given us remarkable responsibility.
You have trusted us to take care of the land and the animals:
The cattle and the sheep, the deer and the pigs,
Kiwi, pukeko, weta and seagull,

**Whale, snapper, dolphin and shark,
Paua and penguins and seals.
O God, amazing, mysterious God,
Your greatness is seen in all the world.**

That psalm uses some interesting words about God – greatness, the joy of the universe, amazing, mysterious God. May I invite you to continue thinking about who God is for you, - maybe the strongest image is of God as your rock or your light, your comfort or your strength. God can be all those things and much more. Today that psalm and some of the other readings speak of the creative power of God, dynamic power. The creative power of God is everywhere and in all of us. The spark of God is alive in each one of us. The Spirit of God can work through us.

2. Thinking about Caring for the Animals

That psalm also says that God has given us remarkable responsibility for the animals and trusted us to care for them and for the land. Some translations of the Bible choose to use different words to describe what is really meant to be ‘care for and look after, be responsible for’ – but words like ‘rule over, have dominion over’ have been used.

What does ‘have dominion’ over animals and the earth really mean? We will think about that - but first we will listen to some of the creation story from Genesis chapter 1

From Genesis 1

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. God said “let there be light” and there was light. God saw that the light was good.

God said “let there be sky and let there be dry land and let the land produce vegetation” and God saw that all was good.

And God said “Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the sky. Let the land produce living creatures.” And God saw that all was good.

God created man and woman in God’s own image. God blessed them and said to them “Be fruitful and increase in number. You have responsibility for all living creatures”. God saw that everything was very good.

Having responsibility for looking after all the creatures of the earth, all the animals, birds and fish, and the plants that grow in the earth, is what this really means. Those translations that say something more like ‘having authority over, or having dominion or even subduing’ may contain part of the meaning but there is no sense that anyone has permission to treat animals badly.

The words of Psalm 8 put it really well - *God has given us remarkable responsibility and trusted us to take care of the land and the animals.*

Sadly many people have taken the harsher understanding of subdue and dominate which is not what the original Hebrew text says. We are to take care of animals not subdue them. Animals can bring us wonder and delight – and I’m sure that for those of you who have pets, that is your experience. We are going to sing some new words to a well known tune that help us to think about the creatures of the earth bringing wonder and delight.

Sing: O God your creatures fill the earth with wonder and delight

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O God, your creatures fill the earth with wonder and delight,
And every living thing has worth and beauty in your sight.
So playful dolphins dance and swim; Your sheep bow down and graze.
Your songbirds share a morning hymn to offer you their praise.

You made the pets we welcome in— they're wondrous blessings, too.
With paws and whiskers, wings and fins, they offer praise to you.
O Lord, you call us to embrace these creatures in our care.
May we show kindness, love and grace to all pets everywhere.

You made the creatures on each farm; You know the things they need.
May they grow healthy, safe from harm, and safe from human greed.
Just as a shepherd loves the sheep, You know their joy, their pain.
Lord, bless the animals we keep; may all farms be humane.

Your creatures live in every land; they fill the sky and sea.
O Lord, you give us your command to love them tenderly.
We're called to have dominion here--to care for them always.
By loving creatures you hold dear, we offer you our praise.

3. Thinking about learning from the animals

We can certainly learn from animals. In Job's great argument with his friends and with God, he suggested that we could learn from the animals. In chapter 12 of Job we find some words that Bruce will share with us.

"Ask the animals and they will teach you, or the birds of the air, and they will tell you, or speak to the earth and it will teach you, or let the fish of the sea inform you. They know that the life of every creature and the breath of all mankind is in the gift of the Lord. Wisdom is found amongst the aged. Long life brings understanding."

And then in Isaiah chapter 11 we find these words about animals

"The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion together and a little child will lead them.

The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child will put his hand into the viper's nest. They will neither harm nor destroy all on my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea."

We can learn from the animals ... about trust and getting on well together. That was part of the message from that metaphorical image. Much of Jewish writing and story telling was metaphor, picture language, that provides a different way of looking at things. Such metaphorical language was not meant to be taken literally. Everyone knew that cows and bears would not eat together or sleep in the same place; lions would not eat straw; children would not be safe playing near a hole where a snake lived. The real message was contained in the last verse we heard – knowledge of God will spread throughout the earth, the creative power of the Spirit of God will spread its energy everywhere. But there is another sense in which we can learn from animals. Many stories that children really enjoy are written about animals.

I have a story about animals to share with you today that might help us all to reflect on what it really means to care for each other. Some of you will have heard it before but it is the kind of story that we can all enjoy hearing more than once.

Quaky Cat by Diana Noonan and Gavin Bishop

Tiger was a 'helper, a buddy, a friend' determined to help other cats. We can all be helpers, buddies and friends to those we know who need a friend and someone to care about them.

4. Our response to God

With thanks

We can give thanks for animals and the choir is going to sing about that.

Choir sings: Creator God we give you thanks for those who live

... in different kinds of places from us ... and the pets who live with us

With prayer

Including a simple version of the Lord's Prayer and singing the Prayer of St Francis.

With our offering

5. Thinking about what Blessing means

Blessing sometimes has the simple meaning of speaking well of, but often in the Bible it has a much deeper meaning.

Psalm 84:5 reminds us "*Blessed are those whose strength is in the Lord, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage.*" We are all on a journey of adventure with God, we could call it a pilgrimage through life. We bless others by giving thanks to God and honouring God in that life.

In Ezekiel 34: 25 we read about the covenant of peace God promised to make with the people of Israel and in that covenant God promised to send showers of blessing.

You may remember the story of Isaac giving his blessing to his sons Jacob and Esau before he died – passing on the power of God, the life of God. Or the story of Jacob wrestling all night with God and asking for God's blessing.

The blessing was powerful. Jewish belief was that blessing brought new life and energy to them. Blessing was imparting God's power.

There are many examples in Psalms and Proverbs of asking for God's blessing and also acknowledging that those who find wisdom in God are blessed.

We are worshipping today with the people and animals we love.

Being channels of God's love to other people - and returning the love that our animal friends give us, is a kind of blessing.

Animals are part of the family for many of you. They are precious – they keep you company. Maybe you have brought them today in order to say thank you to God for what they mean to you but also that they might be blessed for themselves.

Blessing of each animal and the people with them

- that they might enjoy life, energy and companionship.