

Feast of St Francis, At Titirangi Presbyterian, 2018.

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This is the closest Sunday to St Francis Day, and it is also the last Sunday in the official Creation Care month of September. So my concerns today are creation care and in particular animals, as an important part of God's creation.

We don't have any animals here with us as some churches do, but animals are bounding into our sights aren't they? We find ourselves with plenty of questions? Why do we love some of them so much: dogs and cats, and yet we are the sworn enemy of others, like rodents and stoats?

In the secular world our concern for animals is seen in the rapid rise of **vegetarianism**.

Increasing numbers of people are paying attention thoughtfully to what they eat. We have friends who told us the other day that they were not eating farmed animals. But that this was just a guideline. If we fed them animals that was OK. And they might have a lamb for Christmas.

I have always felt conflicted about meat, but I lived with three carnivores. And the children were allergic to this and that and psychologically unable to eat vegetables. There was no way we could do vegetarianism. I had a student who grew up on a dairy farm, tried to become vegetarian and fell into a deep depression. Some people have to go back to eating some meat.

So our relationship with animals is on the agenda, but there are more questions than we can answer.

But what about us as Christians? What does the sacred book have to say about humans and animals?

If we go back to Genesis we read that humans and animals were created on the same day. On the sixth day. We didn't get a special deal from God. Both human and animal alike are *nephesh hayya*, living creatures from the breath of God. This means that we know something very important about life. It is not just a machine. It touches divinity. It is sacred and mysterious and dynamic. Life speaks to and is derived from spirit.

But it is also In Genesis that we see the first hints of animals and humans **being different**. In Genesis 2 that beautiful but very mythical account of creation, the animals were lined up and named by Adam; naming assumes a subtle power over. And the animals were

deemed not to be sufficient companions for Adam. They were different.

And then there is that mysterious line in Genesis 1 where we are told that humans are made in the image of God.

What on earth does that mean??

In the past we often *assumed* we knew what that meant. It meant speaking, language, intelligence, rationality, or culture or tool making, or emotional capacity , all of which humans at least since the Enlightenment have assumed were human prerogative alone.

Yet, animals we now know from scientific observations, have prodigious amounts of all those things.

Dolphins have very high intelligence; they have acutely sensitive to one another, and they can recognize themselves in a mirror, thought to be some sort of

threshold for self consciousness. You might have noticed that your cat can't do this.

Elephants: I have just read a book about elephants. They are astonishing. They travel vast distances, in female herds. The oldest female is the matriarch and they don't go anywhere without her approval. They carry knowledge of food and water and threats and so on. But more importantly they talk to one another in tones that extend below and above the human range. One group will greet another with elaborate rituals and touching and to talk they stand side by side and move their ears as well as making sounds. OF course we don't know what they are saying but that is partly because we *assume* it is nothing much.

When an elephant dies the elephants closest to it can show grieving behaviours for weeks, much like the whale

we heard so much about who carried her dead infant for almost too long.

Kea: are a member of the parrot family. They are prodigiously clever and love to play very clever tricks on humans. To some extent they read our minds and predict our next moves.

Chimpanzees are our closest cousins. They are like us not only in intelligence. Some of them have been taught to speak, but in aggression and violence. Famous for infanticide and for being close to organized warfare. We might ask: Do they sin? They are also capable of passing on behaviours and knowledge from one generation to the next: they have the first hints of culture.

Animals don't build churches or sit around comparing themselves to us, as far as we know!

But in terms of intuitive connection they surpass us in many ways. Many specific cognitive abilities surpass ours as well.

All of this blurs the boundary between us and animals... Evolution has also blurred the boundary. Human history extends back perhaps 200,000 years, but it may be much longer. Hominin history for a million years, and In that time we were changing gradually.

DNA has blurred the boundary. We once might have suspected we had a massive DNA compared to animals and plants. But when the human DNA was decoded it was discovered we have a very ordinary amount of genetic material, mid range for mammals, about the same as

sharks, a lot less than lilies, and five times smaller than a rare Japanese japonica!

This is all complicated enough if we are non-Christians but as Christians it becomes even more complex.

When we start thinking about animals we find they are all over the sacred book. They really are on God's agenda too. We are made on the same day, animals and humans alike, though fish and birds are on the fifth day. All flesh is covered by God's covenant with Noah after the flood.

The oldest son and the oldest male animal must be protected from the angel of death before the exodus.

Again and again we are told in the psalms that all creatures praise God.

Animals surround the birth of Jesus, Wild animals attend Jesus in the wilderness. Jesus tells us that God feeds the birds of the air, even though they don't work and worry

like we do. A donkey carries Jesus to Jerusalem. Jesus is crucified in fact as the lamb of God.

In Genesis 1:29 we are told that vegetables and seed are food. In Genesis 9:3 humans are giving every creature that moves on the earth. ...

More questions and tensions. Which is the ideal? Which is possible?

So animals are important to God but humans do seem to be special in some way. This takes us back to the image. What does it mean in light of all these blurred boundaries, that we are made in the image of God.

Image can mean something essential is different about us –something like intelligence or language, for instance, but there is less and less evidence of this. It can also mean something relational, that we relate to God and other animals don't. But again, the Scriptures give evidence of

animals praising God in their own way. Or It can be we have a different function or role. Theologians argue for all these different options.

Most scholars now would go for the functional meaning, that we do have a special function and that function is, as Genesis 2 suggests a caring and tending one, so *imago dei* only means something in relationship to animals and plants. We have a duty to care for them. Just as a parent only works in relationship to care of children. That fits of course with the theme of Creation Care. We are different from animals, but that is only meant to increase our care and concern for them.

I myself think that we can't have that function without there being something unique about us. Something in our language and symbolic making behaviour is radically different but it is also in continuity with animals.

Something about our very ordinary DNA makes us different, but it is chastening and humbling that it is so hard to define exactly what.

I would also suggest that animals share in that image because we share so much with them, they perhaps have a shadow of the image of God. They share in the Incarnation because Jesus took *on flesh*, and not just human form. They share, I believe in redemption because they are so central to both the story of creation and that of the new creation. Ps 36 tells us that god saves animals and humans alike. We are told again, that Jesus came to restore *all flesh*. To reconcile *all things*.

It is interesting that some of the most poignant images of the future life, of the restoration, or the new heavens and

new earth, are images of animals in counter-intuitive relationships:

Today from our reading we hear:

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, Every creature, there on the last pages of the Bible, just as they were at the beginning.

And

From Isaiah we hear the famous passages:

*The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.*

⁷ The cow and the bear shall graze,

*their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.*

*⁸ The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the
adder's den.*

*⁹ They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.*

St Francis by all accounts was able to live in anticipation of this peaceable kingdom, able to tame even the wolf. Jesus communed with the wild animals in the desert. In the meantime, for those of us without those powers we have to do our best. There are many ways to help.

One way to help the creatures of the air and the sea is to reduce plastic. The beautiful movie the Albatross shows how Albatross are dying because they are eating plastic from the sea and feeding it to their young.

But restoring eco-systems sometimes means saving one animal from another. Killing introduced predators. In New Zealand, until we can persuade the rats and stoats to leave the birds alone we have to kill them. But we should do this remembering that they are God's creatures too, and that rat DNA is around 97% the same as humans. Rats are nephesh hayya. As Christians then we are called to examine our lives with animals, to think again about how we use them, how we eat and farm animals and how and why we kill. Because we live believing in a much wider and deeper reality we should also long for the day when

The rat and the kiwi chick will lie down together

And the stoat shall live with the penguin.