

Sermon preached by Fr Mark Watson, Canon Pastor, Christ Church Cathedral, Newcastle, at the service of Thanksgiving for Creation with Blessing of the Animals, on 25th September, 2011.

Well isn't it great that we can be here in church with our animals? They're part of our families so it's right that we should bring them with us at least once a year so we can be with them just as we are with other members of our families. It seems that all the pets that come to services like this one can somehow sense that something special's going on here. Animals are an important part of God's creation and they seem to have a sense of God that people sometimes lack.

I heard a story about a single guy who was feeling a bit lonely so he decided to buy a pet. He went to the pet shop and told the owner he wanted an unusual pet but one that would keep him company. After having a bit of a chat, he finally bought a talking centipede. It came in its own little white box. He took it home and decided it would be a good idea to take it to church with him the next Sunday. "Would you like to come to church with me? The people are really nice." But there was no answer from the centipede's box. He was a bit concerned about this so he waited a minute or two, then asked again, "How about coming to church with me? The music's wonderful." But again - nothing but silence from the box. So the man waited a few moments more, then shouted, "Hey, you in there! Would you like to come to church with me? The preacher's really good!" Then a little voice came out of the box: "I heard you the first time! I'm still putting on my shoes."

There's always the chance that someone's pet will misbehave like the parrot a certain priest bought. He asked the man in the pet shop, "Are you sure it doesn't scream, yell or swear?" "Oh, certainly. It's a very religious parrot. Do you see the strings on its legs? When you pull the right one, he recites the Lord's Prayer, and when you pull the left one he recites the 23rd Psalm." "Wonderful!" says the priest, "but what happens when you pull both at once?" Suddenly the parrot screeched, "I fall off my perch, you idiot!"

This service is usually held on or near the 4th October which is the Feast of St Francis of Assisi. Normally we think of a feast as a rather big meal, a sort of banquet or party. When we talk about feast days in the Christian Church, we really mean festivals, celebrations. They're special times for us to remember and learn from the men and women who have tried to be faithful in following Jesus.

Francis was born in the 12th century into a wealthy family. His father was a cloth merchant who hoped that Francis or Francesco would one day take over his family business. There's a story about Francis working for his father by selling cloth one day in the marketplace. Along came a poor beggar who asked him for some money – alms we call it. After completing his sale, Francis ran after the beggar and gave him everything he had. His friends thought he was crazy. When he got home his dad was furious. Another story relates how Francis heard a sermon one day about Jesus telling his followers that they should go out to preach and take no money or extra clothing or shoes. Francis decided to follow Jesus no matter what it took.

He began a religious order, a community of men who lived lives of poverty so they could be completely devoted to God. Francis believed that the world reflected the nature of God like a mirror. That's why he called the birds and animals his brothers and sisters. We don't have to believe all the legends about Francis that he would probably find quite embarrassing and a bit silly, like his preaching to birds who were so intrigued by his voice that they didn't fly away until he'd finished his sermon.

The important thing is that Francis preached that the world was created good and beautiful by God but also that it has been spoiled in many ways by what humans have done to it so it needs what the Church and the Bible call redemption or salvation. We need to be rescued from sin. As human beings we are also part of creation. And we also have been given the job of looking after it, to be what we call stewards or caretakers of creation.

Our pets can help us to be good stewards because they depend on us for so much. Animals in the wild are better able to fend for themselves but our pets are domesticated so they're more dependent on us. They remind us that all creatures are dependent on God. If we don't feed our pets and wash them (if they're the kind that needs washing) or provide a place for them to sleep and take them to the vet when they're sick, they'll be in pretty poor shape.

Our pets also speak to us of God because they're so forgiving. Just like our pets, God loves us unconditionally. God forgives us for our failures and sins and wrongdoing. As we care for our pets we're reminded to care for all of creation.

This is something for which we can give thanks to God. In the history of God's people thanksgiving is how things are blessed. So when we bless our pets we're giving thanks for them. I've heard sometimes people say they bring their pet along for a blessing because it's been naughty this year and misbehaved which means perhaps last year's blessing has worn off, so we have to come and get another one: a bit like getting our bicycle tyres pumped up when they run down.

Well I'm sorry to disappoint you, but Fr James and I don't have any special powers or magic that will make them good animals who always behave themselves. Bringing our pets for a blessing is a simple way of asking God to show us through these animals something of his own nature – who God is. God loves his creation and teaches us to love it too. Each creature on this earth is special and unique and holy. They remind us of the love of God and that God wants us and all creation to reach our full potential to become all God wants us to be. May God help us as we say thank you for his creation and as we try to be good caretakers of the world.