

Olga's sermon 2.10.11

I felt very honoured to be invited to St. Mary the Virgin Anglican Church at West Derby, Liverpool, on 2nd October, 2011, to give the address. This is what I said:

Good morning everyone, and many thanks to Rev'd Mark Coleman for inviting me here today.

A bit about myself. I was born in and grew up in Liverpool. I have a deep affection for this city, and although I've lived in Australia for over 40 years, being in Liverpool is always being home.

I live in Newcastle, New South Wales, which is about 100 miles north of Sydney. Newcastle is a busy port with beautiful beaches and within easy access to the wine-growing area of the Hunter Valley. I am kept busy working with a charity that I helped to set up 14 years ago. We raise money through our charity shop to financially assist pet owners on government benefits, and also low income earners, to neuter their pets. So far around 23,000 animals have gone through our programme. Our aim is to stem the flow of unwanted animals ending up in pounds and shelters, at least in our area.

Animals have always been my passion. Everything about them interests me. Those of you with pets will know that your pet makes you happy, and vice versa. It is obvious to a pet owner that their animal has a wide range of emotions. They experience happiness, sadness, fear, uncertainty, boredom, and so on. In other words they are very like us. And they want to be with us all the time. Think of that reproachful look they give us when we go out without them, and their joy when we return.

Observation and research shows that a range of emotions also applies to other animals, and is well recognised in hens, pigs, sheep and cattle. All these intelligent animals can be happy or sad. This depends on the lives we provide for them in terms of lower or higher levels of welfare.

And it is shocking to realise that worldwide billions of farmed animals lead lives of pure horror. In the endless quest for increased production and profit, humans have created a nightmare world for them. They are no longer beings with feelings and needs. They are machines.

One of our readings this morning was from Isaiah, and these words of his, I believe, apply in the context of this service. "He looked for justice but found bloodshed. He looked for righteousness but found cries of distress."

There is a humane approach to rearing farmed animals, and that is based on the conditions formulated by the UK Farm Animal Welfare Council. These are known in UK and other enlightened countries, including Australia, as the 5 freedoms:

Freedom from hunger and thirst.
Freedom from discomfort.
Freedom from pain, injury and disease.
Freedom from fear and distress.
Freedom to express natural behaviour.

To provide these conditions is the ideal, at least for now, and in western countries, or some of them at least, welfare is improving, but nowhere near fast enough. UK is ahead of most countries, including Australia, but nowhere should be complacent. There is a long way to go.

The focus of this year's Animal Welfare Sunday, as suggested by the Anglican Society for the Welfare of Animals, is pig farming and the dairy industry.

In the case of pigs, only free range provides adequate conditions for these highly intelligent and sociable animals. It is therefore terribly saddening to learn that in many countries breeding sows are imprisoned in single stalls for many weeks of their pregnancies, and sometimes continually. When the piglets are born they can only feed from their mother through metal bars. UK has higher standards than most western countries, and sow stalls are illegal. They will be banned across the countries of the European Community from 2013.

Australia is lagging behind and poor conditions for breeding sows persist in many piggeries. Single stalls are being voluntarily phased out, as agreed in 2010, and an exact number of sows in stalls is not available, but the best estimate is that there are 100,000 sows remaining in single stalls for longer or shorter periods of their pregnancies. It is hoped that by 2017 all these stalls will be phased out – still a long time off. It will be consumer demand that will hurry this along.

As we all know, consumer pressure is very effective. Think of the infamous battery cage. Although cage eggs are still on the shelves, free range eggs are preferred by many shoppers these days.

I didn't give much thought to cows until I learnt the facts. I saw them in the fields and it all looked peaceful and gentle. But it is not.

To keep the milk flowing a cow must produce a calf every year. Mother and baby bond closely, and then, after a few days, the baby is taken away. The milk is for us. This causes immense grief for both cow and calf, and then for the mother, the whole process starts over.

In the face of all this cruelty the individual can easily decide that there is little they can do. But we are far from powerless. If we decide to take action we become part of the global animal protection community, battling for the animals.

I tend to see this as a fight for good against evil.

Each of us can do something. A few examples would be:

Becoming vegetarian, or serving several vegetarian meals each week.

Using soy milk instead of cow's milk.

Demanding humanely produced food at the supermarket.

Contacting your MP and letting him/her know what you would like to see in terms of reducing cruelty.

And within the church a lot can be done.

Regular prayers for animals, and not just on special occasions such as today.

Animal blessing services are always loved, and they reach into the wider community.

Ask for church leaders to speak out for animals. That would have a huge impact.

Something we have in Newcastle New South Wales, for which I am grateful, is an animal welfare page on our diocesan website. If you don't already have one, your Bishop might like this idea. He is a Patron of the Anglican Society for the Welfare of Animals. Further, the world's first anti-cruelty organisation began in Liverpool.

Our church has a wonderful history of care for those in need. I hope you agree that animals should be brought fully into the circle of concern.

They cannot voice their anguish. We must be their voice. They will never have a vote. We must press for their rights. I see that as very much what God would want of us, for his animals.

And thanks so much for letting me share my thoughts with you on Animal Welfare Sunday. It has been a real privilege.

Olga Parkes

2.10.11