Beyond Consumerism
ST FRANCIS' DAY

4 OCTOBER 2024

Reflecting on FOOD AND ANIMAL WELFARE

Although St Francis' day occurs in October, this Beyond Consumerism resource can be drawn on at different points in the year to celebrate animals, both domestic and wild. As a nation of animal lovers, we give thanks for our pets and express our concerns for wild animals under threat of extinction. We balance the tension between our consumption of meat and other animal products with an increased interest in vegetarianism and veganism.

Arthur Rank Centre
CONFIDENT RURAL CHRISTIANS

St Francis' Day

The Season of Creation reaches its climax on 4 October on St Francis' Day. Endearing stories and legends abound concerning the Italian Catholic friar known as St Francis of Assisi and his relationship with the animal kingdom. He reputedly preached to the birds and went out to persuade a ferocious wolf to stop attacking the people and livestock of the Italian town of Gubbio, if the local townsfolk agreed to feed the wolf. Francis never saw animals as commodities for the convenience of humans. He saw all creatures as his 'brothers' and 'sisters', a vital and equally important part of God's creation. Often depicted in paintings surrounded by animals and birds, St Francis is recognized today as the patron saint of ecology, which honours his great love and deep respect for animals and the natural world.

Tensions in life and the Bible

When it comes to the treatment of animals, the Bible can prove both contradictory and controversial. Adam and his immediate family were vegetarians, but Adam's son, Abel, kept flocks, sacrificing some of the firstborn as worship to the Lord. The sacrificial lamb continues as a dominant theme in scripture culminating in the death of Jesus on the cross. In Genesis 7, Noah was instructed to take every kind of living creature into the ark to preserve them from the Great Flood. Then in Genesis 9, these birds, beasts and fish were given to humankind for food.

According to Job 12. 7 - 10, the life of every living creature is in the hands of the Lord. This is the God who looks after every sparrow and knows the number of hairs on every human head (Luke 12.6). Humans share the earth with the animals (Psalm 104.11 - 18) and it is right to take proper care of them (Proverbs 12.10). And yet, in Acts 10, Peter had a vision of all kinds of four-footed animals, in which a voice told him to 'kill and eat'. We don't want to major on the more gruesome facts of animals slaughtered for meat, but we cannot ignore the fact that meat production forms a significant part of the agricultural industry.

Within the animal kingdom, certain species prey on others for their food. Such is the present order of things. However, the prophet Isaiah looked towards a future in which the wolf would live with the lamb, the leopard would lie down with the goat, and the calf and lion would live peacefully together (Is. 11. 6 – 7), perhaps giving biblical precedence for returning to a vegetarian or a vegan diet.

Practicalities of organising an animal service

This may be more of a worship event than a worship service, and a general celebration of animal life. The event can include the essential worship ingredients of praise, thanksgiving, confession, bible reading, teaching and prayer, but it may be fluid and more activity based. Any corporate elements, when everyone gathers together, should be short and succinct to avoid restless animals and anxious people.

A worship event involving real animals large and small is fraught with challenges, so it is important to plan thoroughly, and well in advance. An event could be held on a farm where the animals are already contained in separate fields and pens. If people are invited to bring their own pets, careful instructions should be given to ensure neither animals nor people are exposed to unnecessary anxiety or risk. The invitation to bring your own animals immediately ensures ownership and involvement. However, as a less chaotic alternative, invite people to bring photos of their pets and former pets.

An animal service can create a good missional opportunity to build relationships with those who don't usually come to church. We keep hens, which are always a good talking point with villagers especially when spare eggs are available. Our kitchen overlooks the village green, so we are also familiar with all the regular dog walkers and horse riders. These people can all be given a personal invitation. You may also want to invite representatives of a local veterinary practice, animal sanctuary or animal charities such as the RSPCA and RSPB.

In some rural areas this kind of event could be an appropriate follow-up to a local agricultural show, where the responsibility for a large array of animals firmly sits with the show organisers. A celebration of St Francis could then be held in church the next Sunday. The following worship ideas can easily be adapted and incorporated into a regular church service. The congregation could be invited to bring photographs of their pets, farm animals and wild animals, especially those under threat of extinction.

Worship Resources

Many of the suggestions below can be used as separate ‘discovery points’ or ‘prayer stations’. These can be spaced around a farmyard or a church, and participants can engage with them in any order. If you have invited a vet or animal charity, they could also be allocated display space.

A St Francis’ Day Prayer

Creator God,
we acknowledge your handiwork
and stand alongside all the creatures you have made.
Thank you for our treasured pets, large and small,
for companionship and enjoyment.
Thank you for cattle and horses,
sheep and goats, pigs and poultry,
for wild beasts, birds of the air, and fish of the sea.
We marvel at soaring birds and animals that scuttle,
flying insects and those that hide in the depths
of the soil.
Like St Francis, we wonder at
the mighty elephant and the prowling lion,
the enormous whale and the tiniest crab,
the busy bee and worker ant.
May we grow in our love and appreciation for the
animal kingdom,
following the example of St Francis,
who saw all creatures as his ‘brothers’ and ‘sisters’;
and may our awe and wonder draw us closer to you,
the God of all living things.
Amen.

FASCINATING FACTS

As a piece of pre-worship preparation, invite the congregation to do a bit of research and bring their answers to the event. This could provide a useful school project or a handy holiday activity to get young people intrigued and enthused. Although you will come up with your own questions as you explore, here are a few to spark your curiousity:

1. What is the biggest mammal? Smallest mammal? (Bird? Fish? Reptile? Insect?)
2. What proportion of the global population has a pet at home?
3. How many people in your church congregation own a pet?
4. What kind of animals live on the farms near you?
5. What proportion of cereal is allocated to human food, animal feed or biofuel?
6. How does this use of cereal vary from country to country?
7. How do we view lab-grown meat, cultured without need to raise or slaughter animals?
8. Which animals are under threat of extinction within the next ten years?

Facts can then be collected together and displayed to form an interesting ‘discovery point’, perhaps with an additional quiz sheet to make it more interactive.

Animal Welfare

We are all familiar with the signs in car windows: “A dog is for life not just for Christmas”, so you might want to gather helpful hints on ‘How to look after your pet’ on post-it notes and display them on a ‘Top Tips’ board. These serve as a pertinent reminder that domestic and wild animals all deserve proper care.

Around the world, animals face great environmental stress. Animal charities campaign to raise awareness of the cruelty of poachers and inhumane methods of slaughter, and of animal species under threat of extinction.

You can find real life stories in Tear Fund’s Tear Times magazine or on their website. They also carry good news stories of how both people and animals are developing resilience. Here is one example:

In Amboseli, Kenya, years of extreme weather combined with overgrazing of domestic cattle have turned the grasslands to dust. This in turn threatens the lives of wild animals. However, elephants are developing resilience, travelling long distances to find food and water. Elephant’s long memories help them to find the smallest hidden water sources.

Collect similar stories to form an interesting ‘discovery point’. These facts can then inform our prayers.

Chalk Board Prayers

You will need three large boards preferably black or a dark colour to write on with coloured chalks. Label these: Thanksgiving; Sadness; Hope. Also have some Blu Tack handy for adding any photos people might have brought.

On the Thanksgiving Board, invite people to stick photos of their pets and other animals and write their own prayers of gratitude for their role in their lives.

On the Sadness Board, invite people to write their prayers of lament and confession for the way animals can be mistreated and for those animals under threat of extinction.

On the Hope Board, invite people to write their prayers of hope for the future of the animal kingdom.

Alternatively, you can choose three separate trees, reasonably close together, labeled as above, Thanksgiving; Sadness; Hope. You will need cardboard cut-out animal labels with string already attached. Invite people to write their prayers on animal labels and then hang them on the appropriate tree. Provide spare string and a hole punch for any additional photos.

A Blessing for the Animal Kingdom

Creator God,
each creature has its role and place.
We ask for your blessing on our pets,
who gift us with companionship and enjoyment.
We ask for your blessing on all farm animals,
who provide us with food to nourish us.
We ask for your blessing on all wild creatures,
who fill us with wonder at their diversity.
Call us again to respect all living things
and safeguard the gift of life, now and forever.
Amen.

Music Suggestions

It is tricky to find hymns and songs about animals, although a few traditional hymns refer to them in passing, for example: 'All creatures of our God and King' 'Birds sing sweetly in the trees' ('How great Thou art'). One way around this is to use simple songs to which verses can be added using suggestions from the congregation:

'He's got the whole wide world in his hands', D J Crawshaw, AM 656, StF 536, HON 268, MP 225

For example: "He's got the elephants and zebra in his hands".

'Thank you, Lord, for this fine day', Diane David Andrew, HON 618, SoF 524

For example: "Thank you, Lord, for cows and sheep..."

'Badgers and hedgehogs', or 'Butterflies and moths' from Andrew Carter's Benedicite - for children's choir. This might be a great way to involve the local primary school. These are also available on mp4. The performances of both of these by the First Presbyterian Church Junior Choir, Columbia, are excellent. Search on YouTube for Andrew Carter, conductor Laura Nevitt.

'Green guardians', Alison Blenkinsop, a reworking of 'All things bright and beautiful' to reflect our care of the environment. This touches on how plants, insects, fish and animals depend on one another. https://greenchristian.org.uk/green-guardians-new-hymn-good-for-children/

'If the fields are parched', Chris Juby, Resound Worship, 2020, a song of confession: https://chrisjuby.com/songs/if-the-fields-are-parched/

'Let all creation sing', Paul Zach, Andy Zipf, Resound Worship, 2020, v. 3 includes honey bees, grizzly bears, armadillos and more!

Music and video available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZeCJJiMYR74

'O God your creatures fill the earth', Carolyn Winfrey Gillette, Tune: Ellacombe or Forest Green. https://www.carolynshymns.com/o_god_your_creatures_fill_the_earth.html

'Think of the world without any flowers', Doreen E. Newport, AM 552, StF 92, HON 662, CH4 155, v.2 refers to animals, fish and birds

'Tiny little me', Nigel and Jo Hemming, Vineyard Kids Great Big God 2, 2003, a children's song reflecting on the universe, including various animals, reptiles and insects as well as humankind. Music and video available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SWgoZXLpItc

You might also want to use recorded music such as 'The Carnival of the Animals' by Camille Saint-Saëns

Ancient and Modern: Hymns and Songs for Refreshing Worship, (AM)

Singing the Faith (StF)

Hymns Old and New: One Church, One Faith, One Lord (HON)

Church Hymnal 4th Edition (CH4)

Mission Praise (MP)

Songs of Fellowship (SoF)

Further Resources:

Rob Kelsey, *Praying for the Earth: Remembering the Environment in our Prayers of Intercession*, Sacristy Press, 2021, well indexed with prayers about pets, farm animals, birds, fish, insects, etc. https://www.sacristy.co.uk/books/ministry-resources/prayers-earth-environment

Chris Thorpe, *Ploughshares and First Fruits: A Year of Festivals for the Rural Church*, 2020, Canterbury Press, includes a Lambing Service, a Riders' Service and a St Francis' Day service.

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