

Caring for all God's Creatures – Genesis 2: 18-20 & Matthew 10: 26-31
A sermon by Rev Phil Wootton: Sunday 3 October 2021 – Harvest Festival

I've never been one for pets, but I imagine the first thing you'd need to do on acquiring one is to give it a name. For a goldfish, it may not matter what you choose as you probably won't get much response. But for dogs, you hope the creature will soon be running back to you when called (probably in the futile hope of being fed). Naming a cat gives it a chance to show how disdainful it can be. Perhaps my prejudices are showing!

It's interesting that the first job God gave to Adam is to name each living creature. God created life in all its amazing variety and multiplicity, and then said to the man, 'I'm calling you Adam, and I'm giving you the chance to decide what everything else should be called.' I imagine Adam being quite overwhelmed. Suddenly, in Eden, he's got things running around him and jumping up at him and bouncing him and nuzzling him and buzzing him and fluttering around his ears. He must have panicked – 'I can't do all this!' – and so God says, 'You need someone to help you,' and low and behold, God creates a woman to get him organised.

The few verses of Genesis we've heard today are usually treated as the start of the story of Eve's creation, but it's really important that we hear them for themselves, because this business of giving names is really important. In Hebrew culture, names expressed something about the very nature of a person, and the same applied to animal. Perhaps it's not surprising many birds' names in Hebrew literally are just 'the flutterer' or 'the chirruper', and it's really anyone's guess how they should be translated today. When you name something, it gives you a measure of authority over it, and you assume a responsibility for it. Giving a name is one of a parent's first duties for a child. So, for Adam and Eve, being given the job of naming all creatures means they held a responsibility for all the animals. What was true for Adam and Eve is true for all of us humans. Looking after our pets is an important start.

Jesus commented, 'Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father.' God notices the smallest things of creation, the things that are most common, most taken-for-granted, and God cares for each one. It's not enough for us to care for our pets, our 'companion animals.' Care cannot be limited to the cute and the cuddly, or the bright and the beautiful. God notices the ones we find ugly or annoying – the bugs and beetles, the wasps and ticks and horseflies. And so should we. That's not to say we need to have a sentimental attachment to the midges that bite us, but it is to say nature contains a glorious array of species, each one with extraordinary characteristics living in extraordinary relationships within their eco-systems. Given our God-given duty of care, the extent of environmental destruction and the extinction of so many species, because of human activity, is utterly shocking.

Some other statistics I found shocking are these: if you measured the total biomass (that's effectively the total weight) of all the mammals on the planet, 36% comes out as human, and another 60% is accounted for by domesticated animals – ie those bred for human use. In other words, only 4% are what we'd call wild animals. What a weight of responsibility! Of the 60% of mammals for human use, the vast majority are farm animals – cows, pigs, sheep. Centuries of selective breeding, and decades of factory farming, have enabled humans to maximise yield for food. But how often do we stop to ask about the life of these animals? Pigs are reckoned to be at least as intelligent as dogs, but very often they are reared indoors on metal slats between concrete walls. You wouldn't do that to your dog, so why should it be a pig's life? Chickens are bred to be the fastest growing creatures on earth, so very often their legs, and even skeleton, cannot support their own body weight. This can only be considered systemic cruelty, but we want our cheap food, so we ignore it. It doesn't happen in our back gardens, after all. We don't have to notice. But Jesus said, 'There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known.'

What can we do? I am not any sort of expert, and I have certainly not got myself sorted out on this issue. Clearly there are plenty of animal welfare charities we can support. There are campaigns and petitions we can give our backing to. In the modern world, it is consumer power that speaks most loudly – our buying choices. The decision not to buy meat or animal products can be a powerful statement, and certainly many more people are becoming vegetarians or vegans. But if, like me, you remain a meat eater, then I think we must take special care to consider animal welfare when buying our food. Food labels may not say everything, but they are helpful and significant. Buying British, and local, is better than buying cheapest, but not always a guarantee. If you can, buy organic, which ticks most of the boxes. Animals given an organic diet will almost certainly have outdoors as part of their upbringing. Buy organic also for the sake of biodiversity, with at least 30% more species found on organic farms, and 44% more over-wintering birds. It is, of course, expensive, and not everyone can afford it. But for most of us, if it means our bills go up, the answer surely must be to eat less – smaller portions, meat-free days, or however we can do it.

We celebrate our harvest today, and give thanks for all that our farmers can produce and the near miracle of food security. Thinking of animal welfare is not 'farmer-bashing': quite the reverse. The vast majority care passionately for their animals in a market system that often offers them little choice. As we give thanks, let's keep our eyes on the bigger picture, the healthfulness of the planet, and the care of all the creatures that God has invited us to call by name.