

Issue 7646 - 2 October, 2009

CHURCH TIMES

Search this issue

Login | Subscribe | About us | 

Advertise

Contents

- Home
- News
- Question of the week
- Comment
 - Giles Fraser: Jews, too, are saved by faith
 - **S** Where is the debate about this crisis?
 - **S** The innocent fall foul of a looking-glass law
 - **S** The floodgates have not been opened just yet
 - **S** Aiding suicide isn't care
 - Leader: A family left to suffer
 - 100 years ago: Swedish churchmanship
 - [Why Christians should care about animals](#)
- Letters
- Real Life
- Features
- Faith
- Humour and crossword
- Pastimes
- Books
- Arts
- Media

[◀ back to Comment](#)[◀ previous story](#) | [next story ▶](#)

Why Christians should care about animals

On Animal Welfare Sunday, worshippers should reconsider their kinship with their fellow creatures, says **Andrew Linzey**



So Camden Council is not going to allow a St Francis of Assisi poster to be displayed in its public buildings (News, 18 September). The poster gives details of a weekend of environmental events, including an animal-blessing service, at Our Lady Help of Christians Roman Catholic Church in Kentish Town. The ostensible reason is the council's policy of not allowing posters with the words "God" and "Christian" to be displayed in public buildings. Political correctness gone mad, you might think.

Not entirely, perhaps: there has always been something a bit too radical about St Francis for religious and non-religious people alike. We all know the stories of Francis preaching to the birds and befriending the wolf. They are normally derided as hagiographical gloss. But the underlying theology packs a punch: closer union with God ought to lead to a greater communion with God's creatures.

Francis, writes St Bonaventure, called "creatures, no matter how small, by the name of 'brother' and 'sister' because he knew they had the same source as himself". Long before Darwin and the discoveries of evolution, Francis grasped that divine love establishes a kinship between all living things.

Perhaps Francis acts out that strange verse in Mark 1.13 that Jesus was "with the wild beasts". Jesus does not fight the wild beasts or seek to tame them. He is just "with" them. This, as Professor Richard Bauckham explains, almost certainly had messianic overtones, since the Messiah was believed to inaugurate universal peace between all creatures (as prophesied in Isaiah 11.1-9).

BIBLE SUNDAY 2009

Count on it

Living in the certainty of God's Word

www.biblesunday.org

bible society
making the bible heard

- **Gazette**
- **PDF**
- **Pageturning PDF**
- **Pageturning sample copy**
- **Advertisers**
- **About Church Times**
- **Jobs**
- **Holidays**
- **Links**
- **Where to worship**
- **Archive search**
- **Church Times blog**

Mark, therefore, provides a snap-shot of the eschatological possibility of living peaceably with animals, which Francis dramatically actualises in his own life (see Professor Bauckham's chapter in *Animals on the Agenda*, SCM Press, 1998).

Perhaps if Camden Council had grasped the radical implications of the Franciscan message, it might have been discomfited long before now. Even within the Churches, Francis has been variously invoked, lauded, and canonised, but the idea that living peaceably with animals is a Gospel imperative that has been widely disregarded.

The Church of England has spent decades in liturgical renewal, but does not offer even one prayer for animal welfare. We pray as if God were uninterested in the millions of other species. There is, of course, plenty of sensitivity for the misnamed "our environment", but when it comes to confronting our responsibilities to individual creatures, official publications fall silent.

A classic example was when the Church of England published prayers this summer for those suffering from swine flu (www.cofe.anglican.org/worship/prayers/#swineflu). Here was an opportunity to also remember the thousands of pigs suffering appalling conditions, since their maltreatment was one of the causal links to the disease from which human beings now suffer. In the words of one scientist at the United States Food and Drug Administration, "high-density intensive animal operations" are "hotbeds for pathogens" (www.oxfordanimaethics.com/index.php?p=news&item=47).

Some note of penitence that our gastronomic greed might have helped land us in the mess in the first place would have been wholesome.

Despite official indifference, we are witnessing a grass-roots change, especially among lay people. "You know animals are not my thing," commented a parish priest to me a while ago, "but your animal service was one of the most popular things I ever did." This unsolicited testimony is one of many I receive every year from clerics who use the Service for Animal Welfare (downloadable at www.rspca.org.uk/animalwelfaresunday).

This is not just a British phenomenon. Thousands of lay people have responded to the Humane Society of the United States' religion and animals initiative, co-opting religious leaders of all denominations into signing a new public statement in defence of animals.

One rector of a parish in Australia recently asked permission to revise some sentences in my liturgy. He changed:

One: the world of skylarks soaring above us;

All: the world of foxes playing around their dens,

to:

One: the world of kookaburras and eagles soaring above us;

All: the world of wombats playing around their burrows.

"It sounds more Australian," he commented, understandably. I congratulated him on his skilful use of contextual theology.

YET SOME still ask whether such sensitivity to animal life and suffering is theologically well-grounded. One argument, which I find persuasive, comes from John Henry Newman.

Fair Trade Clergy Shirts
by Butler & Butler

From £29.35
Range of Colours
Men's & Women's
100% Fairtrade Cotton

www.fairtradeclergyshirts.co.uk

CLICK HERE

CLERICAL SHIRTS

Preaching in Oxford in 1842 on the text from Isaiah 53.7, which compares the Messiah to “a lamb that is led to the slaughter”, Newman says that since scripture compares Christ to this “inoffensive and unprotected animal”, so we may “without presumption or irreverence take that image as a means of conveying to our minds those feelings which our Lord’s suffering should excite within us”.

Narrating examples of suffering, Newman exclaims: “For what was this but the very cruelty inflicted on our Lord?” He concludes: “Think, then, my brethren, of your feelings at cruelty practised on brute animals, and you will gain one feeling which the history of Christ’s Cross and Passion ought to excite within you.”

Although Newman elsewhere seems to endorse the usual Christian position of animals, his view here is unmistakable: the innocence of the suffering of animals is Christlike. It follows that those who are sensitised to the sufferings of the Crucified ought to be sensitive to the suffering of all innocent, vulnerable beings.

The feast of St Francis next Sunday (World Animal Day and Animal Welfare Sunday) is a good time to celebrate our fellow creatures, recognise their Christ-like suffering, and repent of our cruelty.

The Revd Professor Andrew Linzey is Director of the Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics, and the author of *Why Animal Suffering Matters* (OUP, 2009).

[◀ back to Comment](#)

[▲ back to top](#)

[◀ previous story](#) | [next story ▶](#)

[Contact Us](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Privacy Statement](#) | [Print this page](#)