

Dear Friends,

This Saturday we have our Animal Blessing Service. This is becoming a tradition. We have run this twice in previous years and this will be the third, although this one, being on-line, has a different feel – very socially distanced. The normal format would be that people are invited to bring their pets along to church, we have a bit of a chat about them, we give thanks to God for them and ask for his wisdom to look after them well. We then also pray for the wider animal kingdom, and for those who husband the land and the animals who share our land with us. We hope that although on-line, we can still do similar things in a way that helps us appreciate what God gives us through the animal world.

Putting this service on in lockdown, has got me thinking about how important animals are to us.

Some, of course, are an important source of food for many people, and I know I can too easily take that for granted. I am always inspired by the Inuit people who after killing for food will give thanks to the animal for its life, honouring the gift they have taken. They will also use every part of the animal so none goes to waste which is a good use of resources and a practical way of honouring that animal's life. Remembering this practice puts a different kind of emphasis on the prayer that many of us learned as a grace at table *“For what we are about to receive may the Lord make us truly thankful.”*

More than for the food we eat, these lockdowns have helped me appreciate the animals that are alive and active around us and what they can give and teach us.

We have a dog who has been a great source of strength and love in our family over these difficult times. She gives a lot, and doesn't demand back a great deal except food, lots of hugs and strokes and, of course, walks. I feel very fortunate that our Vicarage is very near to the moorland that is Ilkley Moor where sheep roam, the occasional deer can be seen, and a large variety of birds nest and feed. We are also easy walking distance to the river Wharfe, where different types of bird thrive – I love watching the heron watch for fish, and always keep an eye out for the flash of blue and gold which is the kingfisher. Apparently, there are otters but sadly I have never seen them.

We also have a garden where birds are regularly at our feeding station and, when the dog is not around, we have the occasional hedgehog visit, squirrels scamper up the trees and cats prowl around. We even had a rat last week. Normally the sight of a rat would mean a phone call to the pest control, but I have to say I just watched it foraging in the undergrowth and it brought me a great amount of pleasure doing so – there must have been slim pickings because we haven't seen him or her since... or has it just gone into hiding, I wonder?

I know that not everyone has such places as moors, rivers or gardens to easily visit but the truth is that even if we don't, or have pets at home, as we step out of our doors Nature is

all around us if we have eyes to see and ears to hear. Just spending even a few minutes each day looking and listening might be just what we need to push away the lockdown blues.

Now, I don't want to over sentimentalise nature. Let us be under no illusion that it is not tough out there. Wild rats are not sweet and cuddly like my dog... nor are wild dogs for that matter. However, there is a simplicity to the animal kingdom that during lockdown, and in this season of lent particularly, is probably very good for the soul to reflect on.

Jesus suggested to his hearers during the sermon on the mount, that they should look to the birds of the air, explaining *"They do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them."* He was telling them that they need not worry about the material things around them, what they have or have not. He asks *"Is not life more important than food, your body more important than clothes?"* . He also implies that whilst God cares for the birds, he values you and me much more.

Like many things that Jesus said, this sounds simple but is designed to really get you thinking. And it makes me think of another question: *"As I look to the birds and the animals during lockdown and reflect on their lives, what can I learn and take with me as we come out of lockdown and start to live our lives in community again?"*

There are, probably, some quite flippant answers to that question, but also some quiet profound ones if we stop and consider. To borrow a bovine metaphor, I will ruminate on that for a while, and perhaps you may like to, as well.

A very short prayer from the pen of Nobel Peace prize winner, theologian and polymath, Albert Schweitzer. Short, but like Jesus's words designed to get you thinking as well as praying.

*Dear God,
protect and bless all beings that breathe,
keep all evil from them,
and let them sleep in peace.
Amen.*

Blessings to you and all who you care for

Peter