

St. Francis and the animals

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church on October 3rd, 2021 – Season of Creation: Blessing of Animals)



Silverback gorillas are fascinating to watch. The photos you see above were taken at the Werribee Zoo a few years ago. The younger ones love an audience. I have spent a number of hours simply watching them with a client. She had severe post traumatic stress disorder, the worst I have ever seen, and one of the things that really calmed her was watching the gorillas, so we would go to the zoo primarily to see them. They are playful, naughty, endlessly fascinating. For me, I can't get over how much like us they are – their fingers and other features. They really look you in the eye and in some way communicate with you, and they certainly know when you are taking their photographs. And I agree with my client, in some way they are calming. I could also stand and watch the meerkats for hours.

One of the most amazing experiences I had several years ago was with a pod of about ten whales. Out in the ocean off the coast of Western Australia I was on a small boat with about 15 others when we were surrounded by a pod of whales. Each of them was as big as the boat, and could easily have upturned us as they went around and under the boat, bumping us as they went. Frolicking in the water, breaching before us, thrashing their tails in the water. Lani, who was about 6 at the time was sitting up the front of the boat and still talks about how they came up out of the water looked her in the face and went back again. As curious about us as we were about them, I felt a strong connection with these gentle giants.

We are surrounded by some amazing animals and of course by those we have domesticated and have a special relationship with – our cats, dogs, rabbits and birds. They are such good company, they calm people down, they are protective and watch out for us. I have worked with many clients, who for them, their pets were like family, and their grief ever so real when they lost them or they had to go into care.

In our creation story, of which we have heard part of this morning, God gives us two tasks. First, to name all the animals, linking us to them in a special way. Secondly, to care for them. Sadly we haven't always got the second part right. I know after my experience with the whales, I became a stronger anti-whaling protestor – how could we destroy such beautiful and gentle creatures. Too many animals are facing extinction as a result of our desire to have more and more. We have forgotten our connection to them.

Jesus, Mark tells us, spends forty days in the wilderness with the wild animals – coexistence was no problem to him. In our reading today, he speaks of the birds of the air not needing to store up food or have fancy clothing as the Lord provides for them, don't worry therefore, look to them as an example for living.

Mountains of Blessing

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church on September 26th, 2021 – Season of Creation: Mountain Sunday)

Today we celebrate the life and work of St. Francis of Assisi, who is best known for his connection with birds and animals. Francis understood something of what Jesus spoke. There are a number of stories telling of St. Francis deep connection with the birds, animals and even insects. Let me share three short ones with you.

First, some background, Francis was the son of a wealthy cloth merchant who became a soldier and was imprisoned for one year. Upon returning home he converted to Christianity and felt called to leave his worldly life. Taking the law to love one another seriously, he dressed roughly, begged for sustenance, preached purity and peace. His family disinherited him. He then began visiting hospitals and caring for the sick and lepers.

One day, walking through a valley he came across a great multitude of birds. As he loved of God's creatures he greeted them, walked amongst them and touched them. Full of joy and wonder he began to preach to them reminding them to praise God who gave them wings to fly and feathers for clothing. It seems they only left once he had blessed them.

There is another story about a time the people of a village had a problem with a wolf who was eating their livestock and attacking people. Even the towns guards could not subdue the wolf. Francis said he would go and meet the wolf. As he approached, the wolf rushed him, Francis made a sign of the cross and implored the wolf to stop his attacks. The wolf lay at his feet and put his head in Francis' hands as he spoke to him. There were no further problems with the wolf. This is why you often see pictures of St. Francis with or beside him.

Finally, there was once a cricket living in a tree near where Francis slept. He held out his hand and called to it, the cricket jumped into his hand and Francis asked it to sing a song of praise to the Creator, which of course it did. It continued chirping, until Francis, who sang along with him, told him to go to his home. The cricket stayed for eight days. Francis reflected on how the cricket had made them all so happy with her praises.

St. Francis connected deeply with the created order surrounding him. It seemed he understood that they too had a deep connection with the Creator and could and should sing praises to God as well. His love and respect for all of creation is something we can emulate. Let's start today!

So, today and tomorrow which is World Animal Day let's remember our connection to all creatures of the world. Let us celebrate their beauty and their diversity. Let us give thanks to God for them all. Let's commit to playing our part in protecting and looking after them. Amen.