

Blessing of the Animals - Reflection

Isaiah 11:6-9

Galatians 5:22-23

Luke 12:2-34

I sometimes wonder if we really domesticated dogs, or perhaps if they domesticated us. After all, they have gone from having to fend for themselves to (generally) being well cared for, fed, having a safe and comfortable place to sleep, and usually having an enjoyable level of mental challenge. In order to domesticate us, they had to offer us something useful, learn our language, and – probably most importantly – learn to relate to a different species.

Our Isaiah reading today takes this image of relating across species to a whole, new level. In a scene that is reminiscent of the second creation story, the animals are together – predator and prey can live together in peace without fear or worry. There is a tradition that says that in the Garden of Eden all the animals (including people) were vegetarian; that it was only with humanity's first sin that people and animals started eating meat. It's a nice piece of mythology that tells us something about the relationship we are called to have with the rest of creation.

This is poetry – an idyllic exploration of what relationships can be like. Importantly, this does not simply include with other people, as with many of these descriptions, it also includes the animals that share the world with us. The imagery we have from this poem in Isaiah shows connecting across traditional boundaries and barriers in our lives to those who are different, not to change them, but certainly in a way that is safe for all.

Perhaps some of the young people would like to write a poem (or draw) something about what this idea might look like for people today.

This idea of safety is also central to our Gospel reading. In this case Jesus is talking to his disciples. They are a broad group, not just the 12 who we call "apostles." They would have been men and women of all ages, and probably also across the socioeconomic spectrum. We know that some people were poor – we hear stories of fishermen, and tradesmen – we also know some were wealthy men and women. In this emerging community, we hear the call to not get stressed about being able to cope with day-to-day life. The implication, from the context, is to ensure the community can provide for everyone's needs.

"Living in the moment" is often described as part of Buddhist meditation and philosophy, however, as we see here, albeit said in a more poetic way, it is also part of the Christian approach. One of the differences between human consciousness and at least some animals is that ability to live in the moment, rather than constantly focusing on the past or future. That said, of course there are also animals that have this capacity and perhaps it has been more about communication than actual planning.

What might it look like for us as humans to better learn that ability which the animals show us so clearly? Where do we find the balance point between not worrying and making sure we contribute towards our needs? It does not mean that we do not take any responsibility

for our future needs, or do any reflection on our past, as both are important, but rather than we do not get anxious about it.

Anxiety happens when our perceived stressors are in excess of our coping mechanisms and it is increasingly a problem for people today. I can understand this – the changes in our world and society have stripped away much of the agency that we used to have to plan for our future, both on an individual and global scale. I can understand young people being anxious about the future of the planet, due to global warming, as well as their own personal future with the cost-of-living crisis. Unlike in Jesus' day we cannot just say "God will take care of it..."

However, the animals in our lives can still show us a way. Like them, we are also meant to live in community, whether this is our village, a pack, or a flock. And part of being in community is about caring for each other in the ways we can. Part of what makes us human is our ability to expand that care beyond those who are "like us" to the people and animals who are different to our sense of self, and therefore to be able to reach beyond our traditional boundaries.

The blessing of the animals is a reminder of this reaching across boundaries – that God is not limited by care of one species or another – and it is also a time to give thanks for the blessings the animals give to us.