

The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Bruton Parish Church
The Rev. John Maxwell Kerr
Sunday, October 2, 2011

FEAST OF ST FRANCIS OF ASSISI

I think we have it backwards this matter of the blessing of animals. May I explain?

My dog, Rose, was a black flat-coated retriever. She was brilliant at pastoral care.

She was called Rose because the people who were going to buy her hadn't done their research. Sight unseen, they called her "Yellow Rose of Texas," but were surprised that she was not a *golden* retriever. Rose was never ever what you'd describe as "yellow," being a black flat-coated retriever. So they didn't take her, and I did and she was brilliant at pastoral care.

I'd be walking to work through the College grounds, briefcase in one hand and Rose trotting along on her lead in the other. Students would come up and crouch down and say, "Hello Rose," then look up and say, "Oh, hello Sir." Then they'd talk to Rose. They'd tell her their grades were slipping, or that their girlfriend had run off with a gerbil. And Rose would sit, listening, head cocked over on one side, smiling that silly smile that retrievers have, and wagging her tail. The student would give Rose a hug and Rose would lick their face.

Then the student would get up and say, "I feel so much better, thank you Sir." My total contribution to this episode in the history of pastoral care was to hold the other end of Rose's lead. I said nothing, and I know what you're thinking. "If he still had the dog, we wouldn't have to be listening to him now."

However, there's more. My brother David is fourteen years younger than me. He learned to stand up by pulling himself upright on the floppy ears of one of our Irish Setters. My mother called us into the drawing room to see. There was David, unsteadily standing, clutching Rusty's ear. And there, standing very still, was Rusty with that long-suffering, patient and yet adoring look in her beautiful eyes.

Can you imagine what might have happened if we had not had dogs? Why, David might still be crawling around on his hands and knees at the age of 54! What a blessing for him as for us all.

Every animal here has a similar or better story. Frisky, floppy, furry, feathered and funny, animals are never boring. Unlike humans, they do not rabbit on (sorry, rabbits), offering their opinions on subjects about which they know nothing, such as politics, the deficit, science, or religion. They are God's gentle means by which God teaches us about humility, gratitude and love. And we, we presume to bless them?

Animals appear quite often in the Bible; well, some animals do: I don't think that cats, or goldfish, or come to that orangutans, get much of a look in. Thereafter, animals feature hardly at all in Christian consciousness. Perhaps we are too self-obsessed, we humans. Today, when we celebrate the saintly St. Francis, we do at least have the opportunity to think outside the box of the human ego.

Animals are God's blessing to us. They are the means by which God has taught many children about care and responsibility. The animals who depend on us do just that; they *depend* on us for their food and water and healthcare. In return, they love us.

From time to time, we hear of people who abuse animals, who are wantonly cruel. Those ads on television for the Humane Society are not exaggerations. No-one would want to see, should have to see, what humans (created in the image of God, we boast) do to defenseless animals.

In the Gospels, and indeed in the teaching of St. Francis, we don't hear much, if anything at all, about the vice of cruelty, and never about cruelty to animals. Why is that? Do you think it might be hypocrisy? People laugh at the British because we give more money in legacies to animal charities than to human ones. What if the Brits were responding to something important? What if they were counting their blessings and they understood that their blessings were given through God's good creation of animals?

Not that any of us in this churchyard would be cruel to these wonderful animals around us.

First of all, let us celebrate with grateful hearts the love that animals give to us, each according to its nature and species. Since St. Francis offers us the chance to do so today, let us turn our gaze outwards from our self-important selves and recognize just who is being blessed here by God. We are.

By these dogs and cats and gerbils and fleas, God might be trying to teach us humility. We have a lot to learn: it's not something to be proud of. Animals are so much that we are not. It is a privilege, I say that it is a *privilege* to be given the care and responsibility for these animals. Perhaps we will rearrange the words of the blessings next time. Maybe next time we will get it right and thank God for the blessing God gives us through these creatures.

However, I have not mentioned Jesus. Now I shall. On Christmas night, after the choirs of angels with their brass band had ascended to the heavenly places; after the shepherds (not one of whom could sing in tune) had traipsed off to watch over their flocks by night; after the tourists got back into their coaches (the ones with the big signs "BIRTH OF THE MESSIAH TOURS"); after the paparazzi had stopped their intrusive flash photography; it became quiet. Finally, just as it had at the birth.

A very tired Mary reached out and fondled the velvety muzzle of the gentle, quiet ox. The old stable dog asleep in the hay in the corner looked up drowsily and wagged his tail. The stable cat licked her paws, curled up and went back to sleep, just as they had before the noise and fuss. Mary smiled at Joseph. Joseph smiled at Mary; both were humble, grateful and loving. It became a silent night, full of the unspoken blessings of animals.