

Sermon: The Feast of St Francis of Assisi 4th October 2026

St Mary the Virgin, Henbury, Bristol

Psalm 148:7-14

Praise the Lord from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps, fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command! Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars! Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds! Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth! Young men and women alike, old and young together! Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted; his glory is above earth and heaven. He has raised up a horn for his people, praise for all his faithful, for the people of Israel who are close to him. Praise the Lord!

Philippians 2:1-11

If, then, there is any comfort in Christ, any consolation from love, any partnership in the Spirit, any tender affection and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself...and... he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. Therefore God exalted him even more highly and gave him the name that is above every other name, so that at the name given to Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Matthew 11:25-30

At that time Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. "Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Sermon

I'm going to begin with a quotation about animals:

"The question is not, can they *reason*? Nor, can they *talk*? But, can they *suffer*?"

Can you guess the age of this quote?

- Since 2000?
- In the 1980s?
- In the 1960s?

No - this is a quote from the 18th century – the philosopher and social reformer Jeremy Bentham, and it was quoted in a report by Compassion in World Farming, entitled "Recognising the Sentience of Farm Animals".

Why is it important? And particularly why is it important to us as Christians – especially today as we celebrate the patron Saint of Animals, St Francis of Assisi.

Let's answer that question by referring to our readings:

From the Old Testament first – Psalm 148. What do we see in this passage? We see a creation – and all its inhabitants – being united in praise for Creator God. We are used to hearing our hymns and songs sung in *human* voices – but look at the voices that are added together in this Psalm. Not only are the elements of wind and fire and earth and water joining in - but a multitude of plants and non-human animals are adding their voices too:

- Deep sea creatures
- Wild animals
- Cattle
- Creepy crawlies
- Birds

All get a particular mention.

Why are they united in one voice? As it says in the Psalm – it's "to praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted; his glory is above earth and heaven." It is not just *our* ultimate purpose as humans to glorify God, but all of creation's. Time and again, scripture wraps the fate and destiny of humans and non-human animals together – *all* creation is being restored and redeemed through Christ: not just people. And that is certainly something to sing praises about!

Let's move on to our Philippians reading. There's a plea in here to the reader – if we are really seeking to follow Jesus, then we ought to mimic the way he loves, which led him to humble himself for the benefit of others. As it says "Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility, regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others."

We like to think in this country that we are a nation of animal lovers – and we certainly love our pets and companion animals. Most of us who've had pets know we would do anything for them. But does that same self-sacrificial love extend to other animals? It might on occasion extend to wild animals. But it rarely extends to the animals which are farmed for human consumption.

I'm going to share some statistics with you now, which will be very hard to acknowledge.

But I think we sometimes need to listen and face up to the consequences of what we collectively do as a species – things that often go on behind the scenes because it's more comfortable and convenient for us.

A staggering 3.3 billion animals are killed every single day for human consumption.

What if humans were killed at the same rate? The current global human population is around 8.2 billion. If humans were eliminated as quickly as animals are killed for human consumption, the entire human race would be gone in just under 60 hours — that's less than two and a half days.

It's also about the suffering. And this is where we come back to our quote from Jeremy Bentham at the beginning. Farmed animals suffer immensely through lives of forced breeding and confinement. Most never see the sun, never feel the grass beneath their feet, or breathe fresh air. In factory farms, millions die long before they even reach slaughter.

Data Source: <https://veganhorizon.substack.com/p/if-humans-were-killed-at-the-same>

How does all this stand up against the two plumb lines we've been set in our old and New Testament readings today?

- From Philippians – “Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others.” The reason this tragic situation with farmed animals has emerged, is that, sadly, for centuries, we've done the *opposite* of what Philippians is calling us towards - we've put *human* interests above the interest of all others in creation.
- And from the Psalm - we are given a mandate to join with animals in praising and glorifying God. But our collective actions towards farmed animals have effectively silenced their voices of *praise* and replaced them instead with cries of pain.

If we care about our future and want to live with compassion, then we must take seriously the responsibility we've been given by God to act as good stewards of *all* creation – and that includes how we treat *all* animals not just our pets.

OK really hard bit over.

Let's move on to a more hopeful note from our Gospel reading and from Jesus' famous words: “Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ... learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”

This is a call to simpler living. We don't need to strive and achieve and acquire. We don't need to carry the burden of past generational patterns of human consumption that have conditioned us to always expect more and bigger and better. Instead, we can choose to live lighter lives that not only give rest for *our* souls, but also others'. We can become those who choose to find ways to lift the heavy burden that humans place on animals, and the wider creation.

I'm going to end with an Extract from *Laudato Si*, the Encyclical letter written by Pope Francis shortly after he was elected in 2015. He is talking about Saint Francis of Assisi, and why he chose Francis for his namesake. He says this:

I believe that Saint Francis is the example par excellence of care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically. He was particularly concerned for God's creation and for the poor and outcast. ... He was a mystic and a pilgrim who lived in simplicity and in wonderful harmony with God, with others, with nature and with himself. He shows us just how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace. Francis ... communed with all creation, even preaching to the flowers, inviting them "to praise the Lord, just as if they were endowed with reason". His response to the world around him was so much more than intellectual appreciation ... for to him each and every creature was a sister united to him by bonds of affection. That is why he felt called to care for all that exists."

Side note: I read this Encyclical in full when it came out and it completely changed my life and my perspective on caring for creation – I would highly recommend it to you if you haven't read it.

So – a challenge for us as we celebrate this St Francis Day - knowing that we are potentially going to welcome into the church a range of *domestic* animals who we hope are loved and cared for and share lives of harmony with their humans. Alongside this, we have been given a stark reminder and call to action around our relationship with *farmed* animals. The reality of that relationship is not harmonious - it's one which causes suffering not just to the animals but to ourselves and to other people as co-creatures and to the wider creation.

If this topic has moved you or awakened your curiosity to find out more – I'd encourage you to look at a website called becreaturekind.org. Creature Kind is an organisation which helps churches think about farmed animals and food systems and connects it to the Christian faith.

As we reflect on this, may we bravely take on the example of Francis to live in greater honour and harmony with all creation, to see each and every creature as related to us in creation, and may we take up the call to simpler living, lifting the heavy burden from animals who suffer so that we – and they - may once again unite our voices in praise of the one whose name is above all names - Jesus Christ. Amen.