

St. Francis Day, October 4, 2020, St. Anne's
Hosea 2:18-23; Psalm 121, 1 Timothy 6:6-19; Matthew 11:25-30



Today we're celebrating the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi - one of the best known and best *loved* of the saints. Born in 1181 as Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardone, (Francesco was his nickname because his mother was French), he was the only son of a wealthy merchant of Assisi. As a youth Francis was known for wild and extravagant living.



Then, one day he met a leper on the road, and overcoming his natural disgust, he kissed the man's deformed hand. The incident forever changed his life. He renounced his inheritance, and began a monastic life - teaching and praying. He founded the Order of Franciscans and spent his

life caring for the poor and disadvantaged. But today he is best known for his role as a protector of animals, and in 1929 he was made the patron saint of *ecology*



which is why we, along with many other churches, are marking the day with a Blessing of the Animals – although sadly they, like most of you, are not here in person at the moment – hopefully I'll see some of them in a little while.



St. Francis was known for his love of God's creatures, and it was said of him that he could charm the birds out of the trees. While it's easy to dismiss his commemoration as mere sentimentality, the reality is that our relationship to the rest of the earth has become a major factor in global health and indeed *survival*. And Francis's writings, as well as his life, take us beyond mere sentimentality, and challenge us to live lives of humble service caring for God's creatures - both human **and** non-human. I suspect that if Francis were

alive today he'd be among those calling us to re-examine the way we're treating our planet and our fellow creatures.

The bible assures us that God loves and cares about **all** of creation not just the human part of it. It teaches us we **aren't** separate from the earth - we're one part of the created order.



As Christians, we affirm that in Jesus, God became a human being - became a part of creation. And in doing so, made the *whole world* 'holy ground'. Earth is thus a sacred arena in which God comes to us and reveals who God is, and how God works.



Christians have long affirmed that we can learn about God from observing creation. You only have to look around to see the extravagance of God's love for life, and the diversity and exuberance of the divine creative impulse reflected in nature. God's love for life shines through creation. Many of us feel especially close



to God when we're surrounded by nature. It feeds our spirit. The grandeur of mountains, seas and sky remind us that it was God, not we, who brought this world into being.



We experience God in the miracle of a tiny seed sprouting into the complexity of a plant. We delight in the complex order of a forest and the riotous growth of a marsh.



And most of us feel at least some sense of sadness and guilt when we contemplate the destruction that we are collectively causing. I believe God looks with dismay at the way we use the resources of the world for our own

greed and profit. I can only *imagine* what God would say about the cavalier way we treat God's good creation.

Today, as never before in history, we are challenged to transform the way we think about our relationship with the earth and the non-human creatures we share the planet with. And by *thinking* differently to **act** differently.



Until recently human actions have been fairly trivial in comparison with the forces of nature but sadly that's changed. The human race now has the power to affect the world in ways till now unimaginable. We can, and **are**,



literally changing the face of the planet – and mostly not in a *good* way - including causing the mass extinction of thousands of species of plants and animals. And the issue is not simply

that this is causing problems for **us** – the bible reminds us over and over again that



all of creation belongs to **God**. So, abusing the resources and creatures of the world for our own short-term interests is a deeply **spiritual** problem as well as an environmental one.

God has filled creation with inherent goodness and beauty.

And *bodies* – both human and non-human - matter to God.



In God's eyes, 'matter matters' - wetlands and rivers,



wheat fields and forests,



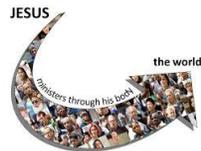
people dancing in the aisles and people sleeping on the streets of our cities.



And the lives of animals and plants and insects and birds and fungi... they *all* matter to God. And so, it **matters** that we are not only fouling our *own* nest in the way we treat this planet but that by doing so, we're destroying the ability of our fellow animals and plants to survive and thrive in **their** God-given ways of being.



Now, of course, the problem with focusing too much on the *huge* environmental problems facing our world is that it just feels so *overwhelming* that it makes it hard to see what **we**, as individuals, can do that would be meaningful. We know that the fate of the world is tied up in what we humans do, but we're part of a *huge* society so the actions of any one of us can seem too tiny to count. But, while none of us *individually* can change societal values, or our society's economic forces, we **can**



and **must**, work *together* at making a difference in a myriad of small actions that **collectively** really do add up to a big impact.

And we **must** work together to *push governments* at all levels to make the **systemic** changes that are needed for the future well-being of this planet.



Since this is St. Francis Day, I'm going to focus on working for better treatment of animals as one area that we can all be involved in and that, *as Christians*, we *should* be deeply concerned with. Now, I

have no doubt that all the various animal companions living with the people of St. Anne's are treated with love and care and are treasured members of the family – but not all animals are so lucky. We still tend to think of farm animals as they once were. But now those bred as food animals in our 'factory farming' systems



are generally raised like this. Factory farming techniques are without doubt the biggest source of animal suffering in our society. (pigs, for example, are as intelligent and sociable as dogs) And besides the issues of animal cruelty

in our current farming system, the production of meat is one of the biggest sources of greenhouse gasses that are helping to drive climate change. Someplace between 15 and 20% of the greenhouse gasses we are producing come from livestock production.



A lot of people don't realize that the original Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals was started in England as the result of Christian vision and was founded by an Anglican priest, the Reverend Arthur Broome. Sadly, while the various global SPCA's do a **lot** of good they

can only scratch the surface of cruelty to animals in part because the law mostly doesn't allow them to actually do their job. Animal cruelty is entrenched in our society's ways of thinking of animals as objects to be used, rather than living beings with the ability to feel pleasure and pain. But one place *we can* influence the treatment of farm animals is in our shopping habits. As economists are always telling us, the market is driven by supply and demand. Producers will focus on *supplying* what people are willing to spend their money on. So *if*, in addition to

reducing our overall consumption of meat, when we **do** buy animal products we buy more organic and free-range and cruelty free meat, eggs, milk etc, there's a bigger incentive to *produce* it.

So, while personally I'm not ready to become a total vegetarian I do eat **much** less meat than I used to. And when I do buy things like milk, eggs, meat etc I try to make ethical treatment of the animals a *primary* consideration. For example, I try



to always buy organic or SPCA certified eggs and if I buy pork, I try to buy only free-range pork because I don't want to support the keeping of sows in farrowing cages. Now of course, all this means these items cost me more than if I was buying so-called

'conventionally produced' food, (although really 'organic' is just returning to the way we've traditionally raised food animals for thousands of years) but for me it's worth the extra cost to know my money is going to support farmers who are making an effort to treat the animals we eat with at least a reasonable level of humane care. It's one piece of how I try to live out my faith in the actions of my life. There are thousands of these kinds of simple actions that, while they certainly **don't** fix all the problems of the world, do take a **step** towards a world with a bit more compassion and caring at its heart.



Today we're honouring the memory of Francis of Assisi, a great man of God, who, in his simple wisdom, understood the wonder of creation and that the plants and animals we

share this world with are fellow creatures of our Creator God. Let us pray that God will give US a similar understanding ...AND the will to make this world a better place, one in which ALL of God's creatures can live the lives God created them to live.