

Blessing of the Animals

St Francis Day

Introduction

Animals refer to all the living creatures people bring to worship, whether they be animals, such as cats and dogs, or birds, reptiles and fish, domesticated or wild. Where people are not able to bring an animal, they may wish to bring a picture of an animal they love or an endangered species in the wild.

Setting

This liturgy is best performed in a park, a public garden or the bush where it is lush and inviting. Space is needed between many of the animals to provide a comfortable context. All animals must be on a lead or in a secure pen for the safety of other animals. Most cities will give permission to use a park provided certain conditions are met. Banners with animals may also be used. It is uplifting if there are creatures such as birds naturally flying around. Groups like the RSPCA, Animal Welfare and others are usually happy to participate.

Special Focus

A special focus for this service is a public expression of the bond we have with animals. Through the service we are able to make them an integral part of our worship life and relationships.

Themes

In our call to worship we join with our animals and all animals to worship our Creator. In the psalm we call on all creatures to praise God. In our confession to recall how we may have hurt or neglected animals. In the readings we discover how animals are part of the family of God in Eden, how animals are created with greater glory than that of Solomon and how they will join in praise around the throne of the Lamb.

The Blessing

It is important to note that in the Scriptures the act of blessing means ‘the imparting of power or life.’ The person performing the blessing is mediating that power from God or Christ to the person or animal involved. To bless is more than an expression of goodwill or caring. To bless is impart God’s power in person! The blessing of each animal, by name, means that health, healing and life are being mediated from God for the benefit of the animal in its relationship with its human partners. *Shalom* is one Hebrew expression of blessing.

Notes

This liturgy has been prepared by the Rev. Barbara Allen, Chaplain of Lort Smith Animal Hospital. Additional notes about this celebration are given at the end of the liturgy.

St Francis Day

Blessing of the Animals

We worship with the creatures we love



BLESSING OF THE ANIMALS

[4th October: feast day of St Francis; World Animal Day]

‘The moral progress of a nation and its greatness should be judged by the way it treats its animals.’ (Gandhi)

Call to Worship

[if your congregation uses power point, project pictures of animals, birds and insects on the screen or wall]

‘But ask the animals, and they will teach you;
the birds of the air, and they will tell you;
...and the fish of the sea will declare to you.
In his hand is the life of every living thing...’ (Job 12: 7, 8b, 10a)

Amen

Lighting of the Christ Candle *[if part of your tradition]*

Silence

Reading as the Introit

[you may want to have a CD of bird/animal sounds playing during the reading]

Reader: ‘God said, “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.” So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. And God blessed them.

And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind, cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.” And it was so. And God saw that it was good.

Then God said, “Let us make humankind”. And God blessed them.

God saw everything that God had made, and indeed, it was very good.’

(from Genesis 1)

Opening Prayer/Processional

Leader: Come, let us gather together.

Response: Let us join the gathering: we bring fins and feathers.

Leader: Come, all is ready for all of creation.

Response: Let us join the gathering: we bring scales and fur.

Leader: Come let us praise our Creator.

Response: We are loved: we bring skin.

Leader: Come, with fins, feathers, scales, fur and skin.

As we gather, we are mindful that, as part of God’s creation, we wish the best for one another. Within this faith community we express this in prayer, and through blessing.

Let us pass God's blessing amongst one another:
Peace be with you!

Response: And also with you.

[passing of the peace, extending to the animals as well]

Leader: 'All creatures of our God and King
Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice.'

Let us sing together, hymn...

Hymn: '*Morning has Broken*' or '*All things bright and beautiful*'

Prayers of Adoration, Thanksgiving and Confession

[see Alternative in Notes]

-bringing forward symbols during the prayer of Confession-water, soil, food, symbol of love [such as a heart shape], a symbol or example of shelter [nest, dog bed]

Creator God,
You have made a beautiful world filled with wonder and surprises!
We adore you.

Creator God who has gifted us with the blessing
of animals, those in the wild, those on farms, those in our own homes
We adore you.

Creator God, you brought into being that which we could not imagine for ourselves,
life we cannot see without the aid of microscopes,
animals we can only see in pictures from remote regions of this planet earth,
We adore you.

We thank you for abundant life;
for the birds we hear in the morning,
for the drone of the bees when we are outside,
for the vast tapestry of life which is interwoven,
We give you thanks.

We thank you for the gift of our own animal companions;
For the joy they bring us,
For the unconditional love and forgiveness which teaches us about you;
For the confidant, the listener, the stress-releaser,
For the benefits they are to our health-and to our Spirit.
We give you thanks.

And yet, we know that we have not always been faithful caretakers of our animals;
Forgive us when we have dirtied their environment, erased places of shelter, polluted
the waters, killed off their food supplies or neglected to feed or tend animals in our
own communities *[bring forward symbols-nest/soil, water, tin of dog/cat food]*

Forgive us when we have neglected our own animal companions;
when we have said we are too busy to play with them,
when we have shooed them away;
when we have made excuses, saying we are too tired...too busy...more important
engagements have come up...so that we do not walk them, cuddle them, spend time
with them.

[bring forward a play toy, or a ball, a walking lead, a dog bed]

Forgive us.

Forgive us when we have not loved them as they have loved us. *[symbol-heart
shape]*

Forgive us when we have not considered the wider picture; when we have neglected
the animals in the wild, the cruelty inflicted in the name of 'sport', or in the name of
food production.

Forgive us when we have focused only on our 'favourites' and neglected the care of
the supposedly less beautiful, those who hold a lower public profile *[may want to
bring in a poster of a dolphin and a picture of a 'less attractive' creature, such as a
spider or a snake-could be down on powerpoint]*

Each year more animals are becoming extinct, or are added to the endangered species
list: forgive us, for allowing beauty to be forever destroyed.

**Forgive us when we neglect to see all animals as part of your creation,
forgive us when we neglect to acknowledge that your love beats in all hearts,
and that you give breath to all creation**

Leader: God is love.

Through Christ your sins are forgiven

Take hold of this forgiveness,

And live your life, knowing that you are forgiven, and deeply loved.

Know that the Holy Spirit will enable you to live fully, richly, and deeply.

Amen

Activity: *Creation and Naming of a New Animal*

[see Notes at the end of the liturgy]

Scripture

Reader: 'O Lord, how manifold are your works!

In wisdom you have made them all;

The earth is full of your creatures.

Yonder is the sea, great and wide,

Creeping things innumerable are there,

Living things both small and great.

These all look to you

To give them their food in due season;

When you open your hand,

They are filled with good things.

When you send forth your spirit, they are created;
And you renew the face of the ground.
May the glory of the Lord endure forever...'
(*Psalm 104: 24-25, 27-28, 30-31*)

Reader: 'Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.' (*Matthew 6: 25-26*)

Reader: This is the word of the Lord

Response: Thanks be to God.

Alternative/Additional Reading (see **Notes**)

Reader: '...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.' (*Galatians 5: 22-23*)

Reflection before the Sermon

'Apprehend God in all things,
for God is in all things.
Every single creature is full of God,
and is a book about God.
Every creature is a word of God.
If I spent enough time with the tiniest creature-
even a caterpillar-
I would never have to prepare a sermon
so full of God
is every creature'
(*Meister Eckhart, a 13th century Christian mystic*)

Sermon/Reflection

Hymn: 'Make me a channel of your peace' (or an alternative, eg: *Where Do All The Good Things Come From?*(in *Together in Song*) or *The Sounds in God's World All Agree* (Digby Hannah))

Offering

[*perhaps a portion of the offering could go towards an animal cause, or as a donation to a local animal shelter. Donations of dog and cat food, advertised several weeks' prior, could be placed in a basket at the door of the church/worship space, and brought forward as part of the offering*]

Prayer of Intercession

Leader: Loving God,
We bring to you the prayers of the people.

Today we offer up prayers for those involved in animal welfare and conservation work:

for the RSPCA, for Earth Watch, World Wildlife Fund, Animals Asia, our local animal shelters [*adapt to suit community and community focus/interest*]

We pray for those who are working at policy and project levels, and for those tending to the needs of animals.

We pray for farmers-that the animals in their care are treated with dignity and respect.

We pray for the strays on our streets; help us not to turn away, but to bring them to a place of safety, where they can be fed, given medical treatment, and the chance to find a loving home.

Help us to be generous: with money, time, and the offer of hospitality within our homes.

We pray for vets and vet practices: enable your wisdom and compassion to be evident wherever there are sick or dying animals.

Enable the animals to sense your presence.

Comfort grieving owners; allow the many warm memories to break the frost of grief.

The Lord's Prayer

Blessing of the animals

[some churches may have the animals line up in order to be blessed, but this can add stress to the service; I prefer the minister/worship leader to circulate. The minister/worship leader circulates through the congregation, asks the name of the animal, places his/her hand on the animal's head (if appropriate) and then blesses the animal]:

Leader: ' [insert name], you were created by God, and you are loved by God. May you and your human family experience joy and companionship together, and continue to be a blessing to each other.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.'

[if a person has brought a photograph of the animal (such as a cat) rather than the animal itself, then bless the owner, and have them pass on this blessing when they return home]

Remembrance of those who have died

[see Notes]

Leader: We remember our animal companions who are no longer with us physically. We give thanks for the gifts they gave us and the variety of ways they enriched and blessed our lives.

We are confident that our Creator continues to care for them.

Amen

Hymn: *'All creatures of our God and King'*

Dismissal/Blessing

[prayed together]:

**God, our Creator, help us to love
all creatures as kin,
all animals as partners on Earth,
all birds as messengers of praise,
all minute beings as expressions of your mysterious design,
and all frogs as voices of hope.**

Amen (*Norman Habel*)

Go out into the world, love one another.
Cherish your animal family,
protest against abuse and neglect of our animals;
exercise stewardship of ALL creation, so that ALL can experience God's Shalom.

Go out into the world, my horizontal and vertical brothers and sisters in Christ.
In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
Amen

Processional

[invite the owners and their animals to process out first. At the door you have 'doggy bags' made up, or a plate with doggy 'treats': invite the owner to take one for their animal companion.

You may choose to have St Francis medals or animal book marks for the congregation to take with them as a memento of this special day.]

Notes

Activity

This could be adapted for use the week before.

Children (and adults perhaps) create a 'new' animal, using materials such as wool, fake fur, fake feathery material, plastic, paper.

They are also to 'name' the animal.

If the 'new' animals are to be included in the service, attach dowel or heavy straws so that they can be paraded in. Perhaps the names of the new beings could be called out as well.

These 'new' creations, carrying on God's work of creation and following in the footsteps of Adam in 'naming' them, could be processed in after the reading from Genesis, and incorporated into the **Introit**.

If the activity is to take place during the *Blessing of the Animals* service, make sure work areas are set up around the worship space to allow easy access to materials. If the 'new' animals are to be created on the day, see if they could be included at the **Dismissal**, or have them process out before the congregation.

Prayer of Thanksgiving

An alternative to the prayer printed in the liturgy is to have someone, or a group of people, to write a prayer, naming an animal that corresponds to each letter of the alphabet,

eg: We thank you for creating aardvarks, bees, cats, deer etc

Holy Communion

I have not included the celebration of Holy Communion within this Liturgy for a number of reasons:

1. to allow a shorter service (we need to be mindful of our animal companions; if the service is taking place within a building, this is doubly important);
2. some animals are motivated by food, and may find this part of the Service quite trying;
3. there may be reluctance on the part of some of the congregation if Communion is served (thereby making it harder for a congregation/Church Council to agree to the holding of a service, or to hold another one next year);
4. if this is a service that draws a high proportion of visitors, they may feel ill at ease regarding partaking of Communion. We want this to be a welcoming service, for animals and other visitors.

Remembrance of those who have died

It is important to be sensitive to the needs of those who are grieving for their animal companions.

As a lead up to the Service, invite people to bring photographs of their deceased, beloved animal companions to the Service. At this point in the service, bring the

photographs forward and place them on a table or bench which has been set up for this purpose.

Have a basket of rosemary sprigs next to the table, for them to take as they return to their seats.

Alternative reading from Scripture

I have included a reading from the epistle to the *Galatians* as a possible source for sermon material.

If one wished to speak about the qualities of our animal companions, and the gifts they give to us (such as joy) and the lessons they teach us about God (especially unconditional love and faithfulness) these two verses could be included here, or during another part of the service (such as before blessing the animals).

Sermon material/resources

There needs to be a focus for the sermon, for there are a number of different topics.

The sermon:

- could be about the life of St Francis;
- could address the lessons our animals teach us, and how our animal companions bring to mind the love of God;
- could examine the interconnectedness of the whole of Creation: care of endangered species, care of our own domesticated animal companions;
- could lend itself to an expose of the theological framework and the rationalisation for conducting a 'Blessing of the Animals' service.

It is important that the service is not viewed as a token gesture, a 'one off' warm and fuzzy service. If we are serious about blessing animals, this needs to be an ongoing concern, not limited to an hour or two once a year.

Consider mentioning other people involved in animal welfare within the Christian tradition:

- St Martin de Porres (he set up the first animal shelter as a result of seeing strays on the street, and remembering what it was like for him when he lived on the street)
- John Wesley (he cared deeply for animals, even leaning towards the premise that animals have souls. He was a vegetarian).
- The clergyman, Rev Arthur Broome, who, with help from others, including the evangelical William Wilberforce, formed the RSPCA.
- Anna Sewell, a Quaker, wrote *Black Beauty* in order to expose the cruel conditions of the working horses in London. The success of her book heralded more humane equipment for horses.

Within Scripture, it may be useful to explore other passages, such as the 10 Commandments (seen as the first record of 'animal rights').

In apocryphal texts (material that didn't make it into our canon of Scripture) there are a number of stories involving Jesus, and later the disciples, with animals. Some of these stories involve intervention on behalf of an animal being cruelly treated.

Alternatives for hymns/songs

Feel free to include songs or hymns from your own tradition, or that have been written by people in your own congregation.

**Rev Barbara Allen
Chaplain, Lort Smith Animal Hospital
August 2007**