



26 May 2013
Trinity Sunday
Choral Evensong
Job 38 v. 39– 39 v. 12
Romans 8 vv. 18–25

Animals and Creation

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It's very easy to talk in a fluffy way about animals, and perhaps that's what you're expecting this Trinity Sunday evening. I want to do something different. I want to argue that our current practice in relation to animals is a practical atheism: living as if our God who created all things, made peace with all things through the life and death of Jesus Christ, and promises to redeem all things in the new creation living as if this our God did not exist. It is my considered judgement that the implications of the faith we share require a very different way of life in relation to God's other creatures. It's a controversial claim, and you may disagree. If you do I'd be happy to have the opportunity to discuss our differences with you. I'd prefer that you agreed with me, of course, but I'd much rather that you disagreed than that you left the chapel this evening feeling that you didn't have a choice to make in relation to the challenge that I've presented.

Perhaps you think that this doesn't sound like appropriate subject matter for a sermon. As a Methodist I take inspiration from the evangelical preaching of John Wesley. In his sermon on the Romans 8 passage we've heard, published in 1781, he argued that it was expressly clear that the liberty Paul proclaims was for all creatures, and for us to know of this future God has for them should enlarge our hearts towards them.

So I want to do three things this evening: first, think about our readings and what they tell us about how Christians should think about other animals; second, consider other ways of thinking and acting towards other animals, hopefully substantiating my diagnosis of our practical atheism; third, think about what it would mean to take a properly Christian understanding of other animals seriously, and therefore turn from practical atheism to practical Christianity.

So first, a Christian doctrine of animal creation: what do our readings teach us about where other animals stand before God? Let's start with the Job reading, one of the major pieces of creation theology in the Bible: after listening to Job's seemingly justifiable complaints to God about the very bad things that are happening to him, in this passage God answers back, out of the whirlwind. And God doesn't say: you're right, you've had it tough, I shouldn't have done that dodgy deal with Satan. Instead, God questions Job's position to question God. God's speech began at the beginning of chapter 38 by asking where Job was when God created the earth: in the verses we heard, God tells Job about how God hunts prey for young lions and ravens, is midwife to wild goats and deer, sets the wild ass free in the mountains, and rejoices in the wild ox (or unicorn, as the KJV charmingly has it) that is too strong for humans to tame. If you read on, you'll find accounts of God's care for the ostrich, the horse, hawks and eagles, and finally the monstrous Behemoth and Leviathan. This is an account of an awesome and majestic creation, stretching far beyond human comprehension and power. Here is a creator God that delights in the life of creatures that are either irrelevant or directly threatening to human life: there is no room here for a cosy and egoistic sense that creation was all about us. God blesses a wild world in itself, without reference to the human, just as God did on each day of creation in Genesis 1.

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It is tempting to rush at this point to take refuge in traditional interpretations the Genesis 1 identification of humans as uniquely imaging God, being granted dominion, the Genesis 9 permission to eat meat, and the Psalm 8 placing of humans in a creaturely hierarchy close to angels, but for once let's resist that easy option and let the wild creation narrated in Job speak to us. In Job, it seems clear that the Genesis dominion has either been lost or never was, and we are left with the awkward question of what it might mean for humans to image the mighty creator God who speaks from the whirlwind and yet cares for baby lions and ravens?

Perhaps you're thinking that we shouldn't do Christian theology of creation through one weird book of Old Testament wisdom literature, but once we've taken Job's wild creation seriously, we see other more familiar texts in a new light. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus offers the birds of the air and lilies of the field as models for Christian discipleship (Mt 6.26–30) and he tells his disciples that not a single sparrow falls to the ground without God's knowledge and care (Mt 10.29). And in Paul's great account of God's justification and righteousness in the face of sin in his letter to Roman Christians, we find the astonishing vision we've heard read, in which Paul foresees the liberation of the whole creation from its bondage to decay and to the freedom of the children of God. From this text and others we can be clear that our fellow creatures are not temporary props on a stage constructed for human redemption; instead we see that God will be faithful to the whole creation, in bringing all creatures from bondage to glorious liberty.

The Christian doctrine of creation is that the good God brought a good creation into being and that good creation witnesses to its maker. It's by no means the only theological view you could have of creation, and this brings us to my second point: anti-Christian ways of viewing God and the world, and their practical outworking. Early Christians argued against heresies suggesting that creation was the evil work of an evil creator god, and that the good redeemer god offered escape from the mucky materiality of this world into pure spiritual existence. Christian orthodoxy insisted on one God, creator and redeemer, and a good creation. Perhaps I should make clear that I, like most Christians, see no contradiction between evolutionary theory and the Christian doctrine of creation: the creation theology of the Bible I have so briefly surveyed addresses very different questions to those of Darwin. But how would things look if we rejected Christianity and tried to construct an alternative account of the world solely on the basis of a Darwinian evolutionary narrative? What a different world that would be from that of Job, humbled by his maker! Instead of thinking of all things as willed into being by a good God, we might tell a story of life as competition between rival organisms in which only the strongest survive. On this account, our existence as humans is not God's gift, but the triumphant victory of our ancestors, and our radical subordination of other species to our needs is the appropriate ordering of power relationships between successful and less successful species. On this account, we might feel justified in breeding other animals to make them ever better suited to our needs, slave species to the master species, and raise them in whatever the most efficient environment is for our ends.

Let's compare this atheistic vision of the triumph of humanity over other species with our current practice. A few weeks ago I was standing on sawdust in a large windowless shed, holding a scraggly 16 day old hen. In the barn were 26,000 other hens the same age; on the site there were 12 similar sheds, all full of hens, on a nearby site another 12 sheds. 600,000 hens on that site. The hen I held was halfway through its 35 day life. It had been born in a commercial hatchery, debeaked, brought to this broiler shed as a day old chick with 600,000 others, would spend 35 days in this shed without access to daylight, then would be picked up by its legs, crammed into a crate with 30 odd others, put onto a lorry for two hours down the M6, then hung by its legs,

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stunned into unconsciousness in an electrified water bath if it was lucky, before its throat is cut and it is plucked and dismembered. According to DEFRA statistics 922 million hens were slaughtered in the UK last year. Assuming 24 hour x 365 day operation of poultry slaughterhouses, we're killing 100,000 hens every hour. It's staggering just in terms of logistics. That's about 200 hens killed in the UK between me beginning this sentence and ending it. There's no time to do it well.

That's just the hens: we don't have time to talk about the sheep and cows and pigs, though I'm still haunted by the squeals of the pig I watched desperately running round a pen to avoid the stunning tongs after it had watched 7 of its fellows stunned and hauled up by their back leg to have their throats cut and bleed to the floor. We never used to eat this much meat: but these efficient production methods have made meat cheaper than ever before, which has increased demand. To me, this new agricultural system is exactly what one would expect if one didn't believe in a God who cares for young ravens and plans to bring liberation to all creatures: it is the realisation of the radical subordination of all other creatures to human ends, a practical atheism.

I hasten to say that I don't want to give atheism a bad name: I have atheist friends who think very differently about other animals and who have been much more proactive about improving the lives of animals than most Christians I know. They have their own reasons. I'm much more interested in the Christians that consume the products of this godless system without regard to the lives of the creatures of God that have become nothing more than its raw material. We cannot claim to believe in the God that made these creatures while consenting to the cruel instrumentalization of their lives in this way. If we want to confess God as the creator and redeemer of all things, we must live it. If we want to image God through our human lives, we must learn to care for other creatures as their creator does.

So to my third and final point: what would practising a properly Christian doctrine of animal creation mean for how we live? For me, the biblical visions of peace between creatures in Isaiah 11 and 65, together with Paul's account of creaturely redemption in Romans, John's revelation of creatures surrounding the lamb in worship, and the Genesis 1 account in which no animal uses another for food, all point to a Christian duty to live without killing other animals, where possible. If you came to agree with my fairly modest claim that Christians should avoid killing others of God's creatures when we can, you would be mostly vegan: not eating meat, dairy products or eggs from practices that require the death of animals, which is all commercial schemes of production. But I'm a realistic kind of guy, and I know I'm not going to persuade most Christians of this any time soon, so here's an even more modest proposal: if we're going to kill creatures of God for food, we owe it to them and their maker to ensure that while they live, they get to flourish in the particular way that is unique to them. That means not eating hens raised in broiler sheds or eggs from caged hens, not eating pigs that haven't had the chance to root around outdoors, or dairy products from cows that haven't felt the sun on their backs or tasted grass. Even this very modest position would mean refusing to consume the majority of the meat, eggs and dairy produce of the UK, let alone international imports, most of which have even lower standards. Organic and free range are good first steps in terms of what to look for in labelling. What if churches, and colleges with Christian foundations, started only serving animal products from animals that have lived real lives, just as naturally as they now serve fair trade coffee and tea?

So I've encouraged you to consider what our readings from Job and Romans might have to say to us about the place of other animals before God, the practical denial of this view in the ways we currently treat animals, and how we might begin to act in a way that was a practical expression of our faith in a creator God.

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My challenge to you this evening is this: if we believe in the kind of God who spoke to Job about feeding ravens and knowing about wild goats giving birth, and who Paul envisioned as bringing liberty to the whole groaning creation, then worshipping this creator and redeemer God has implications for how we treat God's other creatures. We are one small but significant part of this majestically diverse creative and redemptive project of the God who was gracious to us in Jesus Christ and who is present to us in the power of the Spirit: once we've seen all that, we must realize that we can't treat other animals as if none of it were true.