

SERMON
“What could animals hope for”
Stephan Scharf
20th Sunday of Pentecost, October 10, 2010
St John’s Chapel, UCC

Genesis 9:1-5

God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. The fear and dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth, and on every bird of the air, on everything that creeps on the ground, and all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered.

Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and just as I gave the green plants, I give you everything. Only you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. For your own lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning; from every animal I will require it and from human beings, each one for the blood of another, I will require a reckoning for human life.

Romans 8:18-25

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own but by the will of the one who subjected it in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

For in hope we are saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

What could animals hope for?

When I was a child and had a pet that was one of my questions I had for it. It was a white pet rabbit, called, well, "Whitey". I did pretty much all things I see my son do now with his pet hamster. I fed it, cuddled and talked to it and imagined it to be a bit like a little human in animal form. I imagined its hunger and joy, sadness, and thought about what it would like to do: "Does it like to play in the grass or the wheel and what would it like to eat?"

Our pets are real companions, true friends. We know many examples of *the* family cat or *the* family dog. They are part of our daily lives and for many without family living close by pets can become a substitute family.

We mourn their sicknesses and bring them to doctors. We give them good food and treat them well. Some even receive gifts on Christmas or on special occasions.

Trying to think like my pet I also thought what animals generally would hope for, not only when they die but now in their lives. Are they here for us humans, do they prefer to be wild animals or house animals and pets? We keep animals to eat them and animals kill and eat each other. Is that all there is in store for them to hope for?

When we take the perspective of animals that we love, it makes us think what they might care for or how they see the world, what they hope or they wish for. When you listen to children talking with their pets or other animals you see that they do not seem to make a distinction between a human or animal friend. This makes me wonder if children might not have something to teach us there.

Today we remember St Francis of Assisi and think of him and his love and kindness that reached into the world of animal as well. He is said to have had a love and a childlike acceptance of all including animals. We read of him preaching to the birds or making a hungry wolf to live peacefully with the other village animals.

In preparation for Reformation day in three weeks I came across another famous theologian who had a soft spot for animals, singing birds especially, who even turned out to be a

veritable “animal rights activist”. Now, when I tell you that I am talking about Luther, you might be a bit surprised, since we usually imagine him as a fiery and fierce reformer, not a man with heart for his pet birds. But listen for yourselves:

A complaint of the birds against Wolfgang Seeberger addressed to Dr. Martin Luther

We, thrushes, blackbirds, finches, linnets, goldfinches and all other pious, honorable birds, who migrate this autumn over Wittenberg, give your kindness to know, that we are credibly informed that one, Wolfgang Seeberger, your servant, has conceived a great wicked plot against us, and has bought some old, rotten nets very dear to make a fowling- net out of anger and hatred to us. He undertakes to rob us of the freedom God has given us to fly through the air, and he puts our lives in danger, a thing we have not deserved of him. All this, as you yourself can imagine, is a great trouble and danger to us poor birds, who have neither houses nor barns nor anything else, and so we humbly and kindly pray you to restrain your servant, or if that cannot be, at least to cause him to strew corn on the fowling-net in the evening and not to get up in the morning before eight, so that we can continue our journey over Wittenberg. If he will not do this, but keeps on wickedly seeking our lives, we will pray God to plague him, instead of us to send frogs, locusts and snails into the fowling-net by day and at night to give him mice, fleas, lice and bugs, so that he will forget us and leave us free. Why does he not use his wrath and industry against sparrows, swallows, magpies, crows ravens mice and rats? They do much harm, rob and steal corn, oats and barley even out of the houses, whereas we only eat crumbs and a stray grain or two of wheat. We leave our case to right reason whether he has not done us wrong. We hope to God, that as many of our brothers escaped from him, we too, who saw his dirty old nets yesterday may also escape from them.

Written in our lofty home in the trees with our usual quill and seal. (Wittenberg 1534)¹

¹ Preserved Smith, The life and letters of Martin Luther, Cambridge 1911, 360-361.

It is a strange letter; it reveals Luther's dry humor in half mocking half admonishing his servant for catching the birds Luther liked so much.

Many present day considerations about animal rights evoke compassion for the animals' situation by allowing them the range of human emotions and then apply our human law and ethics into the animal world. Luther is doing both in this letter. He pretends that the birds can appeal to him as a person of authority like a fellow citizen of Wittenberg could do and evokes emotions of compassion to plead their case. And reading it I at least cannot help but to wonder anew about how we relate to the animal world around us.

The ambivalent relationship between humans and animals is an old puzzle. How can it be that we on the one side enjoy the companionship of pets, the help animals provide for us in transportation and labor and then on the other side keep and raise animals with the sole purpose of producing meat for us?

Our text from Genesis 9 reflects on this strange relationship between God, creation and the role humans should play in it, especially in regard to the animal world. When we recall Genesis 1 we quickly see that some things have changed after the flood. Now even more humans are described as the supreme masters over the animal world. The language borrows from the description of a conquered people – fear and dread shall be on them – and now the human diet is extended to meat. Humankind is now the ultimate ruler over Creation. In all its harshness it is what we see when we take a look on our present world and our role in it: humans – of all beings on the planet- are the undisputed rulers.

And yet the text puts a stop to human fantasies of power: humans shall not eat meat with blood in it, since the life symbolized by the blood, is God's domain. God's supremacy over creation stands against a tyrannical rule of humans over the animal world. It is only God's concession to humanity to use animals as sustenance. But there are also limits.

It would be tempting to explore now if the ways we produce our food today measures up to the standards laid down in our text, but I want to focus on another aspect.

Let us return to my initial question: what could animals hope for?

The first impression Genesis 9 for the animals' perspective is rather bleak: fear and dread, and the prospect of being eaten – not much to look forward to. But if we take a second glance at the text you can see that there is another layer of meaning.

It is imagined to be after the flood. God had wiped out in anger all humankind and land animals except the ones in the ark. God was disappointed over us humans, over our brutality and murderous instinct- the very good creation of Genesis 1 turned out to be not quite so charming after all.

But the total wipe out was not good either, so – we know the story- God changes, God accepts the faulty humans and alters the contract of living in this world. No more flood, meat for humans, but God is lord of life. In other words: what is described here is the second best of worlds, it is a concession to our cruel nature that effects the whole creation. Take a look at nature and you will find that it functions in a constant circle of death and life, of life on the cost of another life. We can only marvel at the complex mechanism of balance between life and death that make ecosystems work. There is a beauty in it. But have you ever explained to a child how nature works? The first reaction you will probably receive is of shock and disbelief over the inherent cruelty. Now we may call this a naïve and romantic notion that a child needs to overcome. But I think this initial reaction should give us pause, as well.

I see in it a hint of that elusive sense that something is not quite right with this creation. Genesis 9 hints at it and our other text, Romans 8, says it outright.

The creation waits in eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own but by the will of the one who subjected it in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

After the description of humans' salvation in the previous chapters Paul widens his perspective and finds that not only humankind, but the whole creation is in need of healing

transformation. Creation has been groaning in labor pains – looking at the rules of nature, looking at the rule we impose on nature and on the animal life, I find it an accurate wording: creation is not done yet, it is not perfect, not fulfilled, it hopes for more; more from us. Setting our faith in Christ, we are liberated and transformed to live faithfully to God’s good intentions and love. This transformed life in anticipation of God’s kingdom does not only change our human relations, Paul imagines it to effect the whole creation. We have not only been given the means to mend our own brokenness, to step out the old self and embrace the new life in Christ, we are also transformed to fulfill our calling to be stewards over creation, not in dread and power, but with care, compassion and love. We have learned that to seek God’s kingdom means to learn justice for all human beings. In light of Romans 8 we might also have to consider how to learn to extend our love and hopes to all life beyond that.

What could animals hope for – Romans 8 gives us bold vision what that could be. In the love with which we care for our pets I see a glimpse of that new reality of human and animal relationships. Paul doesn’t give us a guideline though what to do, but his visions transcends and might change our perception on the life surrounding us.

I cannot fully see or grasp what this hope for our animals, for the whole creation could mean. As with other aspects of our hope in the kingdom of God I find myself challenged by my own realism: “Accept it: that is how the world works, you cannot change it, be realistic”. Being realistic often is a helpful trait, but in matters of our hope we step into an area of trust in something that is still in the making, we are learning to become realists in the reality of God’s kingdom. That makes us Christians dreamers; dreamers of better futures no one had imagined. We are given the great liberty in the spirit to imagine new worlds with better orders, not to be pragmatists or describers of what is. We are in the good company of dreamers - Paul, Luther and St Francis - when we hope with our pets and all animals for the glory of the children of God.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.