

JUNE 2024 – Pets and Companion Animals

Job 12:7-10

“But ask the animals, and they will teach you,
or the birds in the sky, and they will tell you;
⁸ or speak to the earth, and it will teach you,
or let the fish in the sea inform you.
⁹ Which of all these does not know
that the hand of the Lord has done this?
¹⁰ In his hand is the life of every creature
and the breath of all mankind.



Companion Animals

A few years ago, I was approached by a church member who wanted to scatter her pet dog's ashes by the local canal. She asked whether I would say some prayers while a tree was planted in the dog's memory. I agreed and was amazed at how many people came to support her. Not only fellow dog-walkers with their dogs, but also the Canal workers – one even gave a speech. All of this meant the lady could formally acknowledge the death of her pet in a community she had been a part of for 16 years. The vet had sent her a personal sympathy card, and she had received flowers from neighbours.

We humans have a great fondness of our animal companions, we grieve for them when they die, and personify them, giving them names, buying them treats and taking them on holiday with us. Indeed, our pets are valued members of our families.

Look at history - in 326BC, Alexander the Great founded a city in India following the death of his horse Bucephalus. Animals have also been immortalized in portraits with their owners. Mary Queen of Scots dressed her dogs in velvet suits!

The term 'pet' is cited as “An animal (typically one which is domestic or tame) kept for pleasure or companionship” (OED 2008).

The earliest recorded usage of the term 'pet' was in 1710, although it had been used from 1539, relating to a lamb or piglet reared by hand. Indeed, animals have been perceived in this way for a considerable period of time.

So, is there more to pet-keeping than pleasure and companionship?

There have been numerous reports into why people own companion animals, much of this has arisen from the academic field of veterinary science. Stroking animals is said to help stress, and there is something to be said for coming home and being met at the door with unconditional love and affection, especially if we live alone.

If we keep a dog – then we are encouraged to take exercise. There is a real community of dog walkers, and in my experience each human is primarily identified in this community by the pet they keep - e.g. “That's Willow's Dad”!

2008 statistics reveal that about half of UK households own a pet, of these 22% are dogs, 18% cats, 2.8 % rabbits, indoor birds 2.4%, Hamsters 1.7%. Both indoor and outdoor fish are also common, as are other small animals including reptiles and insects (Pet Food Manufacturers Association 2008).

The popularity of certain breeds of animals at various times is also interesting. Remember back in the 80's how it was vogue for people to own Vietnamese Pot-Bellied Pigs! Thankfully this trend has waned, however it did mean a large number of such pigs ended up in rescue centers, unable to be rehomed.

Today there are numerous modern breeds – such as Cockapoos which were not around 30 years ago – the mixing of breeds.

The statistics for pet ownership show animal ownership is widespread, and is therefore significant in contemporary Britain.

I wonder what connection church can make between the lived experience and current practice of Christian pet owners?

For example, do we offer pastoral care and understanding when a church member's beloved pet dies? Vets now send sympathy cards if an animal has to be 'put to sleep'. What do we do? Do we offer Pet Services where local community can gather to give thanks for their furry or feathered friends? I did a number of these services in Huddersfield and we had Arthur the Cockerel and a donkey turn up!

Do we consider human/pet relationships as deeper than simple sentimentality?

Animals also have a sacred history with relationships with well-known saints. Images of significant saints with animals have survived as illustrated in art and story. Stained glass windows and manuscripts illuminating this, bear witness to the church's tolerance of the human animal bond. Here is the implicit assumption that there is an approval by the church (e.g., Saint Francis of Assisi (preaching to the birds), Hugh of Lincoln (with his Swan) and Saint Anthony (he had a pig)).

Despite examples such as these, animals were viewed with caution by the early church fathers. Aquinas reinforced this notion, that humans had no direct duties to animals, believing animals to be, "instruments of human welfare". This was the dominant view held by the Church.

During the 17th and 18th centuries, some senior clergy accepted pet keeping as part of life, others were not so happy. During this time some church clergymen actively protested to animal abuses.

Rural history records show that up until the early parts of the 20th century sheepdogs used to attend church every Sunday with their masters. Some churches allowed the sheepdogs to sit or lie among the pews with their shepherds; others had designated areas for the dogs and were taken care of by a 'dognoper', paid for by the church!

John Wesley preached a sermon entitled 'The General Deliverance' where it was suggested that before the Fall, animals and humans lived in harmony.

19th Century Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon stated that a person was "not a true Christian if his dog or cat were not better off for it..." (1885).

Pet keeping is popular, it is mainstream and it has some great benefits, but I do wonder whether it will ever be compatible with mainstream Christian theology and practice. Perhaps we should try!

Crematoriums regularly welcome the deceased's pets to funerals; pet crematoriums and memorial gardens are springing up – and I have been asked by my publisher to write a helpful guide for veterinary

staff/students when dealing with customer bereavement. At key moments in the Gospels, Jesus dwells among animals as a sign of humility and of connectedness with God's creation.

(Luke 2:7, Mark 1:13, Luke 9:58, Mark 11:1-10. And of course, domestic dogs can also be assumed to be commonplace in Matthew 15:27).

Although animals and humans play different roles both in the Bible and in our world today. It is clear our lives are interconnected and show us a way of understanding God.

Maybe this is something we could look at more carefully in terms of our church mission... our church work... our church welcome and ultimately any land our church sits on that could be used to be more welcoming of dog walkers – perhaps we could even keep chickens?

Here is a picture of my Stanley for you to enjoy.



(For more reading on this topic see Linzey, A. & Yamamoto, D. 1998. Animals on the agenda: questions about animals for theology and ethics. Illinois: University of Illinois Press).