

Sermon – Bec Wilkinson (Ordinand) – 21 June 2020

How like a raven is a writing desk?

It is a pleasure to be with you this morning as we give thanks to God for the gift of our pets.

As Christians we want to live all of our lives following the example of Christ in a way that brings glory to God. We often look to the Bible to find inspiration but the Bible doesn't actually say a lot on the subject of pets. I suppose you could consider that Noah acquired a whole menagerie of pets when they went two by two into the Ark. And the Syrophenician woman in Matthew makes reference to dogs eating the crumbs that fall from their master's tables, but that is about it. Whilst there are relatively few references to pets in the Bible, there are numerous examples of animals giving worship and glory to God, often just by existing as a part of God's creation. We interact with the animal world in our daily lives, especially if we have pets, participating in this Divine dance between humans, animals and God. God created the world, humans and animals, and the pets which we love, which in turn are teaching us and loving us, just as we care for them, and seek to love God.

This week I thought we'd look at two passages which both illustrate this three-way relationship between animals, humans and God through a particular animal, an unusual choice, the raven.

In 1 Kings 17 we are introduced to the prophet Elijah. He does a brave and bold thing in prophesying to King Ahab. Ahab was an evil king who worshipped other gods. But Elijah tells Ahab that God is sovereign and will be proved to be most powerful by withholding dew and rain. I don't know about you but I would not want this job! So it is no surprise that after this stressful experience Elijah is a bit tired, indeed Elijah is exhausted. God cares for Elijah and could have fed him supernaturally, this is the God sends manna from the sky after all. But on this occasion God uses ravens as divine waiters. God promised to send the ravens, and delivered on that promise the ravens brought food to revive Elijah. I am not advocating for a new lockdown business of pet-waiters or for sharing food with our pets but, I wonder if you recognise this experience in your own life particularly with your pets. I kept a few fancy rats as a teenager, I know it's a divisive choice, I'll willingly defend it over coffee. Anyway, Pets come alongside us in life providing company. My rats would sit on my shoulder and watch the television with me. Pets can also be excellent comforters, they seem to know when we are sad, sometimes even licking the tears from our faces. Our animals minister to us in being consistently present in our homes and in our lives. We serve an intangible God who we cannot see, but in the gift of pets we have a representation of the love of God, we have 'God with skin on'.

And then we have Jesus's teaching in Luke 12. I explored these words of Jesus recently with some of the young people at St Andrews so it was already on my mind for today; although I will admit that I had missed that in both Matthew and Luke's account, in the NRSV at least, Jesus says 'Consider the ravens'. In our culture we do not think positively of ravens, they are considered bad omens, and even associated with death; but we do not have any evidence that the people who initially heard Jesus' words felt that way. In fact ravens have much to commend them. They are intelligent omnivores. Jesus was right they do not have storehouses of grain, but they make the best of what is left behind, a bit like nature's bin men.

Anyway, I digress. I think there are three things we can learn from this passage about what it means to be one of God's creatures. Firstly, that there is value in our simply being, as a source of glory to God. Just like the ravens and the lilies in Luke 12 we are loved by God just as we are and bring God joy before we have done anything in simply inhabiting being one of God's creatures. From my house in Essex today I can see swifts, they are free as they dart about the midsummer sky. They are not concerned by the things that concern me. They glorify God in just being what God created them to be. I am sure if you have a pet at home you have a lot of love for them, this is not because of their behaviour, indeed I suspect sometimes it is despite their behaviour, you love them because they just

are. We bring glory to God in embracing our creaturely selves, and knowing we are loved by God as we are. If God sustains even the most temporary of flowers, enough to decorate them in glory, how much more does God love you?

The second thing to think about is Jesus invitation to 'Consider' the ravens and the lilies of the field. We often phrase this part of Jesus teaching like it was an optional offer, but what if it was more of a command? Hannah Malcolm first opened my eyes to this possibility in her thought for the day in May. Could it be that Jesus has already given us a source of consolation when we are troubled? look at the beauty of creation, truly consider it even for just five minutes, the birds of the air, a flower in the garden, your pet cat. Looking at nature and engaging with it is good for us. Jesus knew that and he knew what it was to live on earth as a man, he knew it could be stressful, sad and difficult and he offers us a tonic. Look outside.

Having just highlighted the importance of being, and truly looking at the created order around us, the third thing to learn from this passage is a doing thing. It is clear that God loves all that God has made giving bright colours to plants, and great variety to our animals. This is not restricted to the things we can see, there are plants and animals atop mountains and in the depths of our oceans which have been sustained and upheld by God for millennia that we are only just beginning to learn about. We can show our gratitude to God for the gift of all creation, and particularly our pets, by saying 'Thank you' as we are today and by joining in with God's work of protecting and sustaining all life on the planet. There are lots of ways to do that but if you are looking for ideas I can particularly recommend the Archbishop of Canterbury's Lent Book from this year, *Saying Yes to Life*.

So what can we say from the example of the raven and indeed all the animals that we know and have loved in our lifetimes? We can thank God for creativity and the diversity of the created world, it is glorious and inspiring. We can thank God for our pets, for the way that they love us, accompanying us in life and comforting us particularly in times of difficulty. We can learn from them about the love God has for us, sustaining us and holding us not for what we do but for who we are, and we can learn to say 'thank you' to God by joining in the work of sustaining and protecting all of creation. Amen.