

# Study 4 : Care for all God's Creatures



*The European honey bee*

## Opening discussion

It has been said that we get too sentimental about animals. So, what are your top three?

## Key Passage

'... but during the seventh year let the land lie unploughed and unused. Then the poor among your people may get food from it, and the wild animals may eat what is left.' (Exodus 23:11)

## Charitable giving

Some might take the view that animal charities take too large a percentage of our charitable giving, which might be better used helping other organisations. When questioned recently, over a quarter of UK respondents (26%) said they had given to an animal welfare charity in the previous four weeks.

However, when the total amount given to charities is accounted for, only 8% annually goes to animal-based charities compared to 19% to religious organisations, 11% to Overseas aid and disaster relief, and 10% to medical research (2019 UK Charities Aid Foundation figures).

## Discussion

What influences your own giving, or not, to charity?

## A time for resting

Read Ex 23:10-12

There are two distinct time periods here with an underlying spiritual basis going back to Genesis and the seventh day when God rested. So, every seventh year was to be a time of sabbath for the land, a 'fallow' year which would allow both poor humans and local wild animals to scavenge for food grown from seed that fell to the ground in the previous year.

But there are also sound agricultural reasons to give land a rest. Fallow periods were traditionally used by farmers to maintain natural productivity. The benefits of leaving land fallow for extended periods include re-balancing soil



*Jean F Millet, Gleaners, 1857*

nutrients, re-establishing soil biota, breaking crop pest and disease cycles and providing a haven for wildlife. For the UK, this technique evolved as a sustainable model of agriculture for several thousand years, and even up to 1939 some 800,000ha of countryside was being cared for with fixed or rotational fallows.

Today, the situation has changed, with large-scale agricultural production replacing smaller, traditional farm units.

The second time period mentioned is the Sabbath rest, not only so that humans (including slaves) might find refreshment, but also those animals that worked the land through the rest of the week.

The Sabbath was dedicated to God, but rest could be said to be God's gift to humankind, their livestock and working animals.

### Discussion

Q) As God's stewards of this earth, are we sometimes forgetful of that role in the way we use the land, and do you think we could go back to a kind of 'fallow' period even in large scale farming?

Q) How easy is it to take a proper Sabbath rest, and do you have any set routines for doing so?

## Animals as metaphors for love and care

Read Genesis 6:19-20, 2 Sam 12:1-10, John 21:15-17

There are various passages in the Bible relating to 'care' and it would be wrong, in thinking about animals, not to touch upon the story of Noah. There have been arguments made both for a literal and a looser interpretation of the Genesis story, but underlying both is an image of Noah taking responsibility for the future wellbeing of human beings and an array of God's creatures, as indicated by the choice of both male and female.



Illustration from *The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck*, Beatrix Potter, 1908

We are used to Jesus making use of the countryside to make a teaching point (i.e. the parable of the sower), but in the story from Samuel we have Nathan doing something similar in order to make a serious point to King David. It's a clever use of story, but perhaps for ourselves it also allows us to glimpse something of the life of a peasant in those days, and their

emotional attachment to animals they owned.

In John's Gospel, Jesus used the picture of sheep to talk about love, although Peter needed some prompting to fully appreciate the meaning. When Jesus asked Peter if he loved him, the word used for love signified total commitment, and yet Peter's response used a word which, although emphasising his love for Jesus did not amount to a total commitment (perhaps remembering his previous denials).

'Feed my lambs' is almost a picture of the peasant in Nathan's story and the love shown to that sheep. In Jesus' words it's about feeding his sheep with the Word of God. The third time he asks Peter, he uses the word for love that Peter used, who now gets the message and pours his heart out to Jesus.

## Discussion

Q) Most of us have grown up on children's stories involving animals with human voices and characteristics. Which ones remain in your memory?

Q) George Orwell's book 'Animal Farm' tells the story of a group of farm animals who rebel against their human farmer, hoping to create a society where the animals can be equal, free, and happy. But all goes wrong, under the dictatorship of a pig named Napoleon. Can animals in the wild teach us anything about living together?

Q) Our tendency toward anthropomorphism (give human characteristics to animals) can have consequences when humans are attacked or killed by them. So, should we stop doing this?

## Practicalities of care

Matthew 6:25-34, Proverbs 12:10, Jonah 4:9-11, Exodus 21:33-36

Many people in the world worry about what they will eat and drink, for the practical reason that they live in a country ravaged by drought, floods, locusts or other natural disasters.

But that does not stop the rest of us getting stressed about the same, even though we might currently have plentiful access to potable water and food.

Jesus' message in Matthew is about not getting overly stressed about life in general. Look at the bigger picture and how God supports all creatures, big and small. This is also demonstrated when we, as disciples of God, share willingly with those who have nothing, from our positions of plenty. It is also reflected in Jesus' words, to 'seek first his kingdom and his righteousness'.

If this is how we live, then all God's creatures can be cared for - sentiments echoed by the writer of Proverbs, and in God's response to Jonah when he was getting so angry. The reply



Roelant Savery, *Landscape with Birds*, 1628

came back that it was not just people, but animals in Nineveh, and mercy would be God's response to their visual display of repentance.

The short passage from Exodus is all about the practicalities of valuing and taking care of animals, as well as accepting responsibility for injuries and paying restitution.

## Discussion

Q) What do you think is the best way to ensure that this world's poor are fed?

Q) We waste a lot of food as a people. Is there anything that you as an individual or family member could do to waste less?

## Fact Finder

Below are just a few issues which have made it to the headlines in recent years...

The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) say that around 31% of our planet is covered by forests, which helps to purify our air and water, along with acting as a carbon sink, but also provides employment, directly or indirectly, for many millions of people worldwide. Yet 18.7 million acres are being lost annually through deforestation. WWF go on to say that 80% of the world's land-based species live in forests.

A Guardian article in 2014 highlighted the impact that current food production has on the planet. The use of 'monoculture' (the industrial scale growing of single crops), genetically engineered crops and the repetitive use of pesticides and chemical fertilizers impact both on human beings and the ecosystems that insects and many other creatures previously depended upon. The decline in Bee population is one such unforeseen consequence, with populations declining at an alarming rate.

In her book 'Dancing with Bees', Brigit

Strawbridge Howard talks of the Sichuan region of SW China, once one of the world's biggest apple producing areas. Native wild bees have been totally eradicated by overuse of insecticide, herbicide and fungicide, and apples must now be pollinated by human hands.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), in talking about plastic pollution of the oceans says, 'The most visible and disturbing impacts of marine plastics are the ingestion, suffocation and entanglement of hundreds of marine species. Marine wildlife such as seabirds, whales, fishes and turtles, mistake plastic waste for prey, and most die of starvation as their stomachs are filled with plastic debris. They also suffer from lacerations, infections, reduced ability to swim, and internal injuries. Floating plastics also contribute to the spread of invasive marine organisms and bacteria, which disrupt ecosystems.

'Invisible plastic has been identified in tap water, beer, salt and are present in all samples collected in the world's oceans, including the Arctic.'

### Discussion

- Q) What can individual Christians do in response to such articles as these?
- Q) The story of the bees in Sichuan is alarming. Should the Church have a more audible voice in speaking up about ecological concerns, and what should its approach be on this topic?
- Q) Slightly big ask, but if you were to look down on the earth through God's eyes, what do you think your assessment would be of how humankind is doing at present?

### Time for Prayer

Pray for all those whose lives are dedicated toward making this planet fit for future generations.

### Action Points

If you have time, read the excellent report 'The food system we choose affects biodiversity: do we want monocultures?' - link on the resources page.