

**Chichester Cathedral**  
**Twenty First Sunday after Trinity, 10.00am Mattins, 21 October 2018**

On my day off we often head for Pagham Harbour, and because of that I've paid many visits to the tranquil little church of St Wilfrid's, Church Norton, just inland from the beach. There is beautiful modern stained glass window there, featuring local wildlife, and to keep the animal theme going, someone has written out in careful calligraphy a poem by Rudyard Kipling. It is about St Wilfrid's chaplain Eddi, preaching the Christmas Gospel in the chapel at Church Norton to a congregation made up only of an old marsh donkey and a yoke weary bullock. It is a stormy night, and the Saxon locals have preferred to stay at home. When word gets out about this, Eddi is mocked, but he says, 'I dare not shut His chapel, On such as care to attend.'

If Kipling's poem is right, Wilfrid's chaplain preached to animals centuries before the more celebrated St Francis of Assisi did the same thing. We, of course, live in a very different world to both of them. The traditions, structures and customs that used to weave the lives of people and animals together have increasingly dissolved. Before the nineteenth century animals were central to human life, and we depended on them for food, work, transport and clothing. And beyond these practical uses, we human beings used animals to chart our experience in the world, to help us understand ourselves and our place in the universe. The evidence for this is everywhere, from the signs of the zodiac (eight out of twelve are animals) to Aesop's fables and children's literature (Beatrix Potter, etc), to the traditional animal symbols for the Gospels seen in the Piper tapestry behind me, to the hundreds of animal references in Scripture; amongst them the two in our Gospel reading this morning:

'Go and tell that fox [that] on the third day I finish my work', says Jesus, before comparing himself to a mother hen 'who gathers her brood under her wing.'

We human beings are now lonelier than we once were, and as animals no longer help us chart and place our experience in the world as they did, we may struggle to understand the full import of references such as these. True, most of us have come across the fox and the hen. Both are to be found in the Cathedral Close, although foxes not so commonly as a few years ago, when I often used to see cubs in our garden.

Foxes are found in many places in the world, and commonly associated with cunning. In the Gospel, however, the connotation seems more to do with foxes as predators. Jesus is being warned that Herod wants to kill him, already having ordered the death of John the Baptist, and responds by referring to 'that fox'.

What a contrast with Jesus' poignant lament over Jerusalem, 'How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you

were not willing!’ In the book of Deuteronomy, God is compared to an eagle which ‘hovers over its young; as it spreads its wings.’ And in today’s first reading from Isaiah, we hear God’s promise to the people of Israel: ‘with great compassion I will gather you.’ Neither God nor God’s Son may be likened to the fox that preys on the young of others, but rather to the hen who gently *nurtures* her young.

As this Cathedral was being built, more than nine centuries ago, Anselm was Archbishop of Canterbury, and he drew on this image in a famous prayer:

‘Jesus, like a mother you gather your people to you; you are gentle with us as a mother with her children. Often you weep over our sins and our pride, tenderly you draw us from hatred and judgement. Lord Jesus, in your mercy heal us; in your love and tenderness remake us.’

Here Anselm has Jesus lamenting the sins of the *Church*, rather than the inhabitants of Jerusalem, who killed the prophets and will crucify Christ. But there is no room for complacency; Jesus’ perception of Jerusalem’s rebelliousness is a perpetual rebuke to all who like to think of themselves as the ‘people of God’, but through their words and actions are in fact rejecting God’s purposes.

When the first verses of the prophet Isaiah speak of the disobedience of God’s people, once again animals are invoked to make the point: ‘The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master’s crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.’

Now more than ever our orientation in an uncertain world depends on Jesus Christ (the ‘lamb of God’) who went on his way to Jerusalem to ‘finish [his] work’, ready to lay down his life for God’s self-destructive people.

Perhaps Wilfrid’s chaplain Eddi would want to add that Christ laid down his life for all living things, and for the healing of the whole of creation. And indeed part of the disobedience of God’s people in our own day is seen in the despoiling of the earth, the mistreatment of creatures with whom we share this planet, and in failing to act quickly enough to combat the effects we humans are having on the whole ecosystem in which we live.

No wonder, as comes through in our Isaiah reading, God is so tempted to be angry with his people. But our Gospel speaks not of anger, but of Jesus’s desire and longing to gather his children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, if only they are willing. So let us ask the grace for ourselves, and for all humanity, to find that willingness in our hearts, so that we may say with full conviction: ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’ AMEN.