

ENVIRONMENT FORUM

It all began about 20 years ago with an invitation from the parish priest to preach at a pets service at Saint Andrew, Buckland in Dover.

About six weeks beforehand a lady called Audrey Eyton asked if she could come to see me. Of course. How can I help? What will you be preaching about at this pets service that is being advertised at Buckland in Dover. I am afraid I have not given it a thought yet because before then I have three confirmation services and the putting in of a new parish priest, all of which require sermons of one kind or another. Do you know what is going on at Dover docks? In what way do you mean? The shipment of live sheep and live veal calves to France in appalling conditions. No I do not know anything about it at all. Well why not come and see? I will.

And a week or two later I did, and I saw immediately what she meant: crowded lorries; a long, slow and often choppy crossing, very long journeys on the continent, often without food or water or any kind of respite. And all to satisfy the French desire for French meat. And the meat from these English animals could be described as French if they had been imported to France on the hoof, as live meat, but not if they had been imported to France on the hook, as slaughtered meat.

That was my introduction to animal welfare, or rather the lack of it. Audrey Eyton had been committed to the cause of animal welfare for many years, and has, since that first invitation, been my mentor and guide.

I joined the Anglican Society for the Welfare of Animals, and eventually became its chairman for about 10 years. The purpose of the society is to help, particularly, the Church of England face up to its responsibility and stewardship towards the animal kingdom, and to become more prophetic in helping Christians and others take our care and concern for creatures with which we share this planet seriously.

The gratuitous cruelty dispensed to our fellow creatures, both in this country, but even more so in many other countries, is so various, widespread and endemic that it is difficult actually for our minds to grasp it. Much of it, of course, is hidden, and so we simply do not know about it. We do not know what goes on in much of the farming industry (and it is now an industry) and in our slaughterhouses, unless we have seen film clandestinely taken of the wanton cruelty there. It is not all like you see in Countryfile on TV on Sunday evenings. And there are a number of sports, circuses, and zoos, all there for our pleasure, but which cause needless suffering to creatures within these regimes.

In spite of voices down the ages to the contrary, the dominant Christian understanding has in the past been that God gave us the creatures of the world for our benefit. There was little thought or conviction that they exist as creatures in their own right.

But, talk with anybody who has actually taken the trouble to study the life of a particular creature, be it a lion, or llama, or a lamb, and you will soon learn what he or she has discovered, that they all have a particular life of their own, with their own needs and desires, their own fears, and their own sense of happiness, and deprivation, and pain and distress.

Yet, even today, in our so-called enlightened society, the dominant understanding is that the creatures of the animal kingdom, insofar as they affect and benefit our lives, are commodities, not living beings.

A moment's thought, and you will be aware of that, when it comes to teaching about, and praying about our Christian responsibility towards our fellow creatures, the silence within our Church is absolutely deafening.

Yes, we have our Pet Services, when we bring some of our domestic animals to church to be blessed and prayed for, and we have our Harvest Festivals, when we give thanks to God for the food we eat and pray for the farming community. But that is about as far as it goes in our consciousness, and in our conscience, about the birds of the air and the fish the sea and the creatures of the land, and their welfare. Our liturgies are almost entirely absent of any mention of our fellow creatures; no mention of them is heard in our times of public intercession, and preachers rarely, if ever, make reference to what God requires of us in terms of stewardship of the animal kingdom.

It simply a large black hole!

So what is required of us in terms of our stewardship, our 'dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.'

Certainly not the domination and exploitation simply for our own benefit and gratification which is still, I am afraid, the default view among us human beings, whether religious or not.

We now know that the Hebrew word for *dominion* does not mean "to dominate" or "to exploit." Rather, it means, 'to take responsibility for', as a ruler is responsible to secure the well being of those within his realm. If we take that Scripture seriously, there is laid upon us by God the duty to see to the welfare, the well-being, of all our fellow creatures.

What does that mean in practice? Surely, at the very least, I suggest that this means that we should do all we can neither to create, nor prolong, any unnecessary suffering. And positively it means taking a real delight in the huge variety of creatures that this earth is blessed with for what they are.

There are a number of both vegetarians and vegans who would say that the slaughter of any creature for food is wrong. And, if they are Christian, they

would go on to assert that the Bible indicates that God's original intention for the likes of you and me here on earth was that our food should be what the soil beneath our feet produces, and that only because of our sinfulness did God allow us to slaughter animals and eat their flesh.

Well, these people could be right, but I remain unconvinced at present. But what I am convinced about is that the way that we treat creatures that are reared for our meat and our milk very often falls far short of our responsibility for their true welfare. We simply treat them, as I have said, as commodities. Battery hens; pigs in slatted cages, cattle raised in zero pasture conditions. And when it comes to their actual slaughter, the conditions are usually unspeakable.

Some years ago I decided to become a domestic vegetarian. By that I mean that I try to avoid the eating of meat at home. This is my private protest against factory farming and the inhumane conditions of our slaughterhouses. I did a deal with my wife Jennifer, that when we went out for a meal as guests in someone's house, I would gladly eat what was set before me. That way I am not a 'pain in the butt' to my host requiring that he or she prepares a special dish for me. Even at home, I eat free range chicken; and I do eat fish. So even my domestic vegetarianism is a very peculiar one, but it is where I am at the moment.

Besides my own continuing involvement in the Anglican Society for the Welfare of Animals, I am a member of Compassion in World Farming. Compassion in World Farming was founded in 1967 by a British farmer, Peter Roberts, and his wife Anna, who became concerned at the growing disconnect between modern agriculture and the well-being of animals and the environment.

Appalled by the cages and crates that had started to become common-place, Peter took his concerns to some of the established animal charities of the day. When he saw how reluctant they were to act, yes even societies such as the RSPCA, Peter called a small meeting around his kitchen table. At that meeting, with a few visionary friends, he took the bold step of founding Compassion in World Farming. It is now a growing worldwide movement of people concerned about how factory farming mistreats animals, wastes precious resources and utterly fails to meet the needs of the planet's inhabitants. By working in partnership with inspirational supporters, progressive policy makers and visionary companies, Compassion in World Farming is working for far reaching changes in farming practices that can at the same time feed the world and will improve the quality of life for billions of farm animals worldwide.

And I suggest that it is about time that the Christian Church caught up.