



Why Animal Welfare Sunday?

What is 'Animal Welfare Sunday'?

Animal Welfare Sunday is a day in the Church's calendar on which we take time to think more deeply about our fellow creatures, to address issues of the well-being of non-human animals. Animal Welfare Sunday provides an opportunity to think and pray about the suffering that human activity causes to our fellow creatures, and our responsibility as Christians to alleviate suffering and promote the welfare of all of God's creatures. Setting aside a Sunday to consider animal welfare also allows us to take time to think about the place of animals in God's Kingdom.

Why this particular Sunday?

Animal Welfare Sunday is the Sunday nearest St Francis' Day. St Francis is the patron saint of animals, and was well-known for his concern for all of God's creatures, both human and non-human, as can be seen in these excerpts from Thomas of Celano's Life of St Francis of Assisi:

"It is truly remarkable how even irrational creatures recognised his affection for them, and sensed the tenderness of his love. Once, for example, when he was staying at the hill town of Greccio, one of the brothers brought him a live baby hare that had been caught in a snare. When the saint saw it, he was moved with pity and said: 'Come to me, brother leveret, Why did you allow yourself to be caught out like this?' As soon as the hare was released by the brother that was holding it, it took refuge with Francis and without any coaxing lay peacefully in his lap, knowing it was absolutely safe...He was moved by the same compassion for fish. When people caught fish, if he had the chance he would throw them back into the water, warning them to avoid being caught next time...Francis overflowed with charity, and he felt pity not only for men in need, but also for dumb animals, reptiles, birds, and all other creatures, whatever their intelligence."¹

Animal Welfare – the facts

Human beings impact the welfare of other animal species in myriad, often negative, ways: we hunt, fish and farm animals to provide food and clothing; we keep animals as pets and companions; animals work for us, some doing dangerous work (animals used by the police and military, in particular); we use animals for sport, often violent or dangerous sport; we use animals for experimentation and research; we degrade the environment and damage or destroy vital habitats needed by our fellow creatures for their survival.

There is a long Christian tradition of concern for animal welfare – many saints are credited with caring for animals, and the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (later the RSPCA), the first of what would be many SPCAs in countries all over the world, was founded by Arthur Broome, an Anglican priest, and other concerned Christians (William Wilberforce being a founding member).

Despite the Christian tradition of involvement with animal welfare, today's Christians rarely, if ever, hear the subject preached or prayed about in church, and few include it regularly in their own private prayers or regularly support animal welfare charities.²

What does the Bible say?

And of every living thing of all flesh, you shall bring two of every sort into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female. Of the birds according to their kinds, and of the animals according to their kinds, of every creeping thing of the ground according to its kind, two of every sort shall come in to you, to keep them alive. Also take with you every sort of food that is eaten, and store it up; and it shall serve as food for you and for them. (Genesis 6.19–21).



Why Animal Welfare Sunday?

The story of Noah is a potent illustration of God's desire for all life to be preserved and cared for, and that this is one of the tasks that God has assigned to human beings.

If you come on a bird's nest, in any tree or on the ground, with fledglings or eggs, with the mother sitting on the fledglings or on the eggs, you shall not take the mother with the young. (Deuteronomy 22.6).

This passage acknowledges the need of the Hebrew people to use the animals of the land as a food source, but it lays down strict conditions under which they may do so – the mother bird must be left to care for whatever young are not taken, and to be available to breed again.

When you come upon your enemy's ox or donkey going astray, you shall bring it back. When you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden and you would hold back from setting it free, you must help to set it free. (Exodus 23.4–5).

According to these commands, given in Exodus, the welfare of an animal is important enough to override even divisions between enemies.

For six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest, so that your ox and your donkey may have relief (Exodus 23.12a).

This passage applies specifically to working animals, but it shows that the Bible recognises that animals have needs, such as the need for rest, and that the humans who keep animals are responsible for ensuring those needs are met. Jesus refers to the above passage (Matthew 12.11; Luke 13.15) to shame the leaders of the Synagogue – not because caring for animals on the Sabbath is wrong, quite the opposite. Jesus is emphasising that the rightness of caring for one's animals, even on the Sabbath, also implies a need to care for fellow humans. A truly godly person will have compassion for all.

The righteous know the needs of their animals, but the mercy of the wicked is cruel (Proverbs 12.10)
The use of 'righteous', to be one who is 'after God's heart' is significant. To be truly godly, we must know and respond to the needs of the animals in our care.

What can Christians do?

- Celebrate Animal Welfare Sunday – make this a regular feature of your church's calendar as a witness to the value of all of God's creatures.
- Pray – regularly include animal welfare in both public worship and private prayer.
- Learn – become informed about animal welfare issues.
- Support – there are charities, such as ASWA and Catholic Concern for Animals that work to raise awareness of animal welfare issues in the Christian community.
- Spread the word – tell other Christians about the theology of animal welfare, and encourage them to make care for animals part of their own Christian discipleship.