

GOD IS LOVE AS SEEN IN OUR BELOVED PETS

(Sermon for Pet Blessing Sunday – 6/10/19 – Job 38:1-3; 39:1-2,19-20,26-27; 40:1-3; Psalm 19:1-8 ; Philipians 4:1,4-7; Matthew 6:25-34)

One of the constant themes of Jesus in his teaching about God is that God is a God of Love. God's main attribute is love and God's chief desire is for that love to be seen and fulfilled in his creation. This may seem an obvious enough characteristic of a God we would want to believe in. But, in Old Testament times, Israel's God was not often seen that way. God was seen only as loving to those who were righteous and did God's will. God was more often feared as a God of punishing consequences who wanted obedience or else there would be unwelcome consequences. Moreover, the pagan gods, in countries around Israel, were very capricious. They were generally only interested in humans being suitably in awe of them and these gods always wanted sacrifices for anything that didn't meet their approval.

Jesus, however, proclaimed a very different image of God. Jesus knew God to be one who doesn't desire or require revenge and who doesn't need any sacrifices for his appeasement. Jesus' God is a God who desires of us instead that we make sacrifices that are demanding of our own personal lifestyles by giving love and compassion and mercy to others and by caring for all of God's beloved creation. We are clearly not very good at doing this, given our daily news reports of tragedy and violence. Look too at the large number of public demonstrations that occur across our world against things like oppressive, undemocratic regimes and against controlling religious legalism such as Islamic Sharia Law and the growth of narrow Evangelical Christianity in the US and Africa and even Australia itself. There are demonstrations against political corruption and the growing use of "fake news and false truths" by leaders. There are demonstrations against the violent abuse of women and sexual abuse of children, and demonstrations against environmental degradation of our planet and the overwhelming effects of human-induced climate change. Most of these people demonstrating in the streets display both a deep desire for justice and a deep love for our planet and for our ongoing human existence. Their frustrated anger is focused on the deep injustices of those in power and of corporate and political greed and corruption and self-serving arrogance.

Jesus said: *"Love one another as I have loved you."*

And Jesus' love was certainly a very compassionate and giving and sacrificial love. Today, for those of us who are pet owners, we celebrate the great gifts of love and joy that our pets give us daily. I am sure most of us love our pets. Many of us even hug and kiss them! Most of us go out of our way to exercise them and feed them well and groom them and even clean up their poop after them! Now that is dedication and love to our pets! In return, they love us unconditionally back. Our pets just love us day in and day out, whether we are grumpy or not, whether we are late home or not, whether we are sometimes too busy for them or not. It's the same sort of love God has for us. Unconditional love.

But trying to love humans is far more complicated. Those here who have lived with both humans and pets, will probably agree that the humans we live with are often far more

demanding and changeable to live with than our pets. We perhaps should be glad that God has given us the gift of animals as pets so that we can know and feel something of what the deep unconditional love of God is like. What if we humans could love each other with that same love of God as seen in our pets. A love that is open and constant and unconditional. In fact, we can! Jesus urges us to love one another and asks us to strive daily to do that.

There was a man called Francis. He lived in a place in central Italy called Assisi at the end of the 12th and the beginning of the 13th century. He was not just any man. He turned out to be a rather special man who chose to leave behind a luxurious well-to-do lifestyle and to become at one with the poorest of the poor. His parents and his local bishop were scandalized as he cast off his elegant clothes and went about barefoot and in the very rough plain habit of a wandering monk. He devoted his life to easing the lot of the very poor and the outcasts and the diseased of society, who sadly were all shunned as bearing the curse of God for their condition in life being due to their apparent sinfulness.

This attitude was a total denial of Jesus' own love and care for such people which Jesus clearly displayed in his life. Francis knew this and so he gave his life in God's service to express this profound love of Christ to others. One of the very particular things that Francis did was to show great reverence and love for not just humanity but also for God's creation and especially the wild animals around him. Stories were told of how he would preach to the birds who would fly down to hear his sermons of God's love to them and of how fish would swim up to the surface of rivers to hear him preach to them. He named and would feed each of the mice that scurried about in his monastic cell. Indeed, travelling anywhere with him could be very frustrating as he stopped and talked to the animals. Even after rainstorms he would stop to cover up exposed worms.

In a nearby town called Gubbio, there was some trouble with a dangerous big wolf who was continually threatening the lives of the town's sheep and goats and even the lives of the townspeople and their children. They were afraid. They stayed inside the town walls whenever they could and only went out in safer big groups, in case they had to fend off the ravenous wolf. So, they sent a delegation to Francis to ask for his help as he was renowned as having a special way with wild animals. So, Francis came to the town and after hearing their deep fears, he then went out to speak to the wolf. Everyone feared for Francis' safety, but Francis said to them: "Don't worry, Christ loves and is Lord of all creatures." As Francis got closer to the wolf, the wolf came bounding up with jaws wide open to deal his death blow. Francis said to the wolf: "Stop and desist in the name of Jesus Christ!" The wolf immediately stopped and lay peacefully down at his feet.

I, in fact, did this once myself, so I know it can be done! I was at Theological College in Morpeth in NSW when I was training to be a priest in the mid 70's. Myself and another student were walking through the fields around the college, when a big Alsatian dog came raging up through the grass barking and slavering at the mouth. The dog was about to lunge at the throat of my friend when I was strongly called to powerfully demand that the dog 'Stop in the name of Jesus'. The dog did stop in his tracks and then turned and ran down

the hill and under the house of one of the college lecturers, who happened to have small children. So, urgently, I ran to the back door of the house and went inside and raised the alarm. We called the Council dog catcher who thankfully soon came with the Police. The dog was caught and muzzled, but sadly later had to be put down as it was severely affected with advanced distemper.

Back to our original story about Francis. Francis then spoke caringly to the now placid wolf: *“You have been terrorizing these people of Gubbio and hurting and killing them and their flocks. They are all, like you, made by God and God loves them and God loves you too. I know you have been doing this because you are hungry and they have been unkind to you as well. I want this behaviour to stop today and for you to make peace with these people. Are you willing?”*

And the wolf nodded.

Francis then turned and said to the gathered towns-people: *“If you want peace with this wolf you must be kind to him and feed him every day. Will you do this?”*

And they all agreed. And so it was. They cared for and fed the wolf every day for a number of years. And then the wolf died. The townspeople wept! It’s an amazing story!

At some point well back in prehistory, all dogs were apparently wild and were predators of some sort. Then someone tamed some of them with love and care and so our faithful dog breeds were begun. A similar story is told in that wonderful film called “Dances with Wolves” with Kevin Costner. The wild wolf was tamed with love and consistency and care and food.

Humans come in all different shapes and sizes and colour, and with all different personalities. But we can all be tamed with love and consistency and care and with food of course. But apart from food and shelter and water, the greatest of these needs for us all is love. We all want and need to be loved. We can all be tamed by the love of God as given to us through the love and care of people around us. That is, when we are gentle with each other and feed each other. Think of someone in your life who is a bit like a wolf and wants to munch and crunch through the lives of others. Someone who needs a little taming of the hurting hungry wolf inside them.

A smile and a welcome and a little food of love daily can go a long way to achieve that.

