Calling all Christians

The Christian and Animal Suffering

by Rev. Canon Arthur Fielder

"Before you crack your breakfast egg stop and think. Which comes first: the welfare of the hen or your breakfast?"

So ran a recent RSPCA appeal advertisement, preceded by a description of an 18 in. x 20 in. cage housing four hens who had been de-beaked with a red hot iron — an agonising process. So much for millions of battery poultry.

Well, before I ate my egg I did stop and think. I thought about St. Francis, whose heart so loved both man and beast. Who preached to the birds, tamed a wolf and saw all creatures as brothers and sisters in Christ. As a Christian I felt uneasy and disturbed.

What is the official line of the Church on this complex question of animal welfare, blood sports, factory farming and research (much of it so suspiciously hidden from public view and investigation)? The answer seems to be that the Church in general, and the General Synod in particular, avoids the subject. The prayer book has no intercessions for animals, and rarely is the question raised in the Religious Press.

Occasionally a parish has a "pet service," when the local clergyman blesses budgerigars, tortoises, puppies, kittens and hamsters. It all feels faintly absurd. Animal welfare, too, is often associated with emotionally cranky people who, with an excess of compassion, put their creature interests before the vast sufferings and needs of humanity.

I would like, however to suggest that for the Church the excess of compassion is on the other side of the scales. So obsessed has the Church become with the plight of mankind that it has little or no time to explore its responsibilities towards God's animal creation.

For there is no doubt about it. All around us helpless creatures are being misused, exploited and tortured by modern man on a massive scale in furtherance of his sport, his research and his food. Should not the Church, in the name of Christ and his mercy, be taking some open and positive action?

But first we must look at the other side of the coin. Animal pain, intensive farming and killer sport can be, and indeed is, vigorously defended.

It is contended, for example, that poultry in wire cages must be happy and contented because they continue to lay eggs. That veal calves in constricted stalls deprived of movement are at peace within themselves because they continue to eat. That wild creatures live in fear of predators, and that therefore a bit of hunting by man adds only minimally to the normal pattern of nature.

Another interesting argument propounded by C. S. Lewis is that creatures do not feel pain as do humans. For the creatures are only sentient and are not self-conscious of what is happening to them. For example, when Adolf Hitler is said to have strung up his would-be assassins on piano wire with meat-hooks in their jaws, they felt excruciating torture. But a fish played upon a similar hook at the end of a fishing line really feels very little discomfort, as a fish is not self-conscious.

But convincing as these arguments are to many people, it has been assumed by society, be it over the slow process of centuries, that they are specious and that helpless creatures need the protection of the law. Animal welfare has become a crusade — but not, sadly, a Christian crusade. Should not the Church now publicly proclaim which side she is on and base her arguments on biblical teaching?

We must start with some very basic ideas found in the first two chapters of Genesis.

Man is made in the image of God and is given dominion over the fish of the sea, the fowl of the air, the cattle and all creeping things. He is also given authority to name the creatures. Dominion certainly implies power over those lower orders, and has resulted in the domesticated use of animals to further man's interests. But power also brings responsibility; and here Genesis introduces a radical and far-reaching limitation. The creatures are not to be used for food.

Listen to the text:—**"Behold I have given you every herb yielding seed, and every tree in which is the fruit of an herb yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat."**

The Bible text goes even further, and includes animals in this conjunction. **"To every beast of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to everything that creepeth upon the earth wherein is life, I have given every green herb for meat."**

Here is a shock for most of us who enjoy our Sunday roast. It does seem clear that in the mind of God, before the Fall, in his ideal kingdom man and beast are vegetarian:—

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid — the cow and the bear shall feed, and their young ones shall lie down together. The lion shall eat straw like the ox — they shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain.

Does not all this suggest that the predatory practice of flesh-eating is alien, and is only endemic to the state of the fallen man living in the bondage of corruption?

It is only as man seeks, by the grace of God, to climb from this pit that he shakes off his degrading need to hunt and shoot and kill, and learns instead to love. In Christ he is a new creature; the old things are passed away.

But why should we extend our love for one another to a love of, and care for, animals? The answer must lie in solving the riddle of the purpose of the creatures in God's scheme of creation. Certainly his creatures have value and meaning. While man may sell sparrows in the market-place, not one of them is forgotten in the sight of God.

The purpose of the creatures seems to be the praise of their Maker — so magnificently expressed in the paraphrase of Psalm 148:—

O ye whales and all that move in the waters,
O ye fowls of the air,
O all ye beasts and cattle,
Bless ye the Lord, praise him and magnify him for ever.

Such thoughts are undoubtedly in the mind and teaching of St. Francis.

But the tendency of the modern world is to treat creatures as things having no intelligent goals of their own, but subject only to the aimless thrust of the evolutionary process. Their inward and secret lives are ignored.

Then there is the all-embracing universality of the gospel. Our Lord commanded us to "go into all the world and to preach the gospel to the whole creation." We preach not only by word but by deeds of love and care and compassion.

We are interlocked with the animals. They are vital to our spiritual welfare and our sanity. If we destroy the creatures, we destroy our environment. They are integral to our lives and should live under our protection. God has given them to us in sacred trust.

As the feast of St. Francis approaches, may I suggest a code of practice for Christians as they try to steer a course through this moral minefield of the animal creation?

Christians must be very selective in the foods they buy and eat, always studying the small print and favouring at all times a balance towards vegetarian diet.

The councils of the Church should openly oppose blood sports, and set aside time for public debate on intensive farming and experimental research.

Christian parents should ban from their young families the use of toy guns and discourage this form of play.

Let there be at least one sermon in the Church year on animal welfare, and much more public prayer.

I do know that such a code is, for Christians, full of inconsistency and compromise, for we are living in and are part of this fallen and imperfect world. But we have to start somewhere to encounter the evil in our midst and to fight for reform — in the name of our all-merciful Saviour, who has commanded us to preach the gospel to all creatures.

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