

CHRIST THE LORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH PINOLE CA

The Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost: October 4, 2020

The Feast of St Francis and the Blessing of the Animals

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Good Morning everyone and Happy St. Francis Day and Blessing of the Animals. So while there is a lot of turmoil within the country right now, I think it only fitting that we turn our heads and minds away from the news this morning and focus on lighter things. Focusing on lighter things does not mean we are ignoring the world around us, but instead we can feed ourselves spiritually so we can continue to carry on. Doing your spiritual work is important and doesn't always have to be so serious. A lesson our pets often try to teach us.

So I begin this morning addressing the Gospel with an old tear jerker story, which I am sure some of you have heard. A boy and his mother take their dog to the veterinarian knowing the dog has had a long life and it is his time to cross the rainbow bridge. In order to protect the boy, the veterinarian was going to give him all the medical facts and explain the exact reasons the dog was dying, hoping it would ease the moment of decision and trying to explain that dogs don't live as long as people. The boy pushed aside the facts and replied:

“I think we are on this earth to enjoy it. To play, to have fun, and to learn how to love. My dog has already done that. We play daily, he loves his toys and licking people's faces, and he loves us no matter what else is going on in the house. It takes people a lot longer to learn these things, but for my dog I guess it's time for him to go over the rainbow bridge because he has loved us well. I will see him some day when I have learned these lessons of fun, play and love as well.”

Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will."

So after that tear jerker, I will move on to St. Francis Day things. A little more on the lighter side.

I know it isn't Christmas yet, although I hear some may already be shopping online, but it won't be long before the stores are again filled with Christmas items to put on display, including the Nativity Set that includes the Holy Family, the Wise Men, and guess what else? Animals, that's right. In fact, I bet you can't even remember seeing a Nativity Set that you felt was complete without the animals. Everything from the dove above, the sheep, the camels, ox and donkey, some even have goats. Can you guess why? I never knew this either, but it was because of St. Francis.

Now please note, the actual birth of Jesus probably took place outside the village in what was referred to as a "Red Tent" or "unclean room" where women did their female business. We have no actual record of whether there were animals there or not. However, in 1223 according to Bonaventure's biography, St. Francis got permission from Pope Honorius III to set up a manger with hay and two live animals—an ox and an ass—in a cave in the Italian village of Greccio. He then invited the villagers to come gaze upon the scene while he preached about "the babe of Bethlehem." So overwhelmed with emotions was he, they say Francis could only refer to Jesus as "the babe", because saying "Jesus" brought a flood of tears and emotions - such was Francis' love.

In contemporary nativities, the ox and the donkey are usually represented close to the manger. Legends tells us the ox and the donkey kept the baby Jesus warm with their breath. But both these noble animals are connected to the Christ through other symbols and legends as well.

The donkey, prized for its strength, endurance and sure-footedness, bore the pregnant Mary across the rocky terrain from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, to Bethlehem in Judea. And 33 years later, by riding a donkey into Jerusalem, Christ would show he came in peace and not prepared for war, as would have been symbolized by the riding of a horse. In fact, the mention of a colt, refers to the younger, more innocent animal, in contrast to a larger-framed stoic beast.

The ox is a symbol of patience and strength. It was one of the most important animals in the development of civilizations, providing great strength for agriculture, clearing forests, as well as moving people and supplies. Some say legend reveals that the ox was sacred to Osiris, the Egyptian god of the underworld and agriculture; while the donkey was sacred to his brother Seth, the god of chaos. This points out that these two creatures appearing in the nativity scene indicates that former pagans recognized the new son of God.

Sheep were the most pervasive animals in the Middle East. A man's wealth was measured by the size of his flocks. They are mentioned hundreds of times in the Bible. Judaic Law declares they are "clean" animals and therefore could be eaten. They were also used for religious sacrifice. The Metaphysical Bible Dictionary from the Unity School of Christianity states that sheep "represent the natural life that flows into man's consciousness from Spirit, guileless and pure."

Of course there are a list of many more animals that can be seen on display at different Nativity scenes, but this year remember as you put up your Christmas decorations, and especially when we do the Nativity play, whether live in church, or some other digital way, that the first one that included animals came from St. Francis.

Our pet friends bless us everyday with their love and the Spirit that resides in them. It is only fitting, that we take a moment to acknowledge they are a gift from God. I now turn the reflection over to Sandy and Lissa for some beautiful poetry.

