

Views from the Pews for Advent 3: Worship with animals

The traditional Christmas crib as established by St Francis – that great lover of all animals – always includes the sheep that accompanied the shepherds to Bethlehem, and the cattle that shared their manger with the Christ child. We are used to seeing them standing around Mary and Joseph in reverent poses, gently reminding us that the Incarnation was for them too. But for the rest of the year we tend to forget the wider creation.

Our former Dean Jan Joustra changed that, when he designed the kneelers at which we now receive the sacraments at the altar rail. He and the LOFT group spent many months carefully embroidering on them the story of the Waikato River, from its sources around the central North Island volcanoes all the way past our Cathedral and down to the sea at Port Waikato. Jan and the team incorporated images of the landscapes, forests, birds, animals and villages that live alongside the river and draw their lives from its waters, and the seas into which those waters run. Jan's designs included representatives of the native creatures of the air (a butterfly and a long tailed bat), the forest (two fantails and a tomtit), the lake shore (two pukeko), the sea shore (a turnstone and a banded dotterel) and the oceans (two Hector's dolphins and an Antipodes Island fur seal). They are there to help us praise God for creation, all the year round.

Most magnificent of all is the great brass eagle holding up the scriptures on his outspread wings, ready to carry the love of God to the four corners of the world. Traditionally each of the four gospels represent a different aspect of Jesus. John's gospel, as the one most occupied with Jesus's divinity, is represented by the eagle, as it is believed to be directly addressed to the church, so has a special significance in Christian art. The idea of using eagle-shaped lecterns goes back to before the Reformation. The symbolism of the eagle is derived from the belief that the eagle was the bird that flew highest in the sky, and was therefore was able to approach closest to heaven.

Our eagle has suitably fierce talons, a sharp beak and a determined expression, as if to reassure us that he will never tire of bearing his precious load and defending it against all comers. Thanks to our tireless People's Warden, his brass feathers get regular polishing to gleaming dignity.

Kim King