

## **Views from the Pews: Human and animal natures**

The Biblical writers got many things right about human nature, except for the idea that human life is quite different from, and separate from, the rest of creation. That was a reasonable assumption from what they knew at the time, but we can now see creation as a seamless continuity, from animal nature through individual humans to secular society to religion. Animal life, human life and scripture are full of examples.

Competition for genetic advantage among animals is real and ruthless, and has much in common with human behaviour. But what is natural among animals becomes criminal for us. The main job of the male members of a pride of lions is to defend the females and their cubs from other, stronger males, for at least the two years it takes for the cubs to grow to independence. So why do new male lions taking over a pride of females immediately kill all the existing cubs? Because the new males don't have time to waste investing in any other males' cubs. They may have only a couple of years in charge before they are evicted in their turn, so they get the females to produce cubs for their new mates as soon as possible. It seems cruel and wasteful for the species as a whole, but what matters over the long term is that the next generation of cubs will be fathered by the incoming males. The characters of more merciful males will be wiped out over time.

Male lions are certainly more willing to take action against their predecessor's offspring than are human fathers, at least in our time, but the bias in favour of our own flesh and blood has influenced human society from its origins. Human parents who adopt unrelated children do so not by instinct, but as a deliberate moral or cultural choice. Conversely, the literary stereotype of the cruel step-parent is based in hard fact.

Rivalry between siblings did not start with Cain and Abel, since the strongest chicks of hawks and pelicans always kill or evict the weakest. But some animals have discovered ways to avoid uninhibited aggression. Graded assessment signals can prevent fights between well-armed animals, and the loser is allowed to retreat gracefully. Territorial animals avoid trespassing on each others' ground. Likewise, Jesus pointed out that conflicts can be avoided by reasoned negotiation on the way to the court (Matt 5:25). Let's rejoice in our common heritage!

*Kim King*