

Views from the Pews: St Francis and the Wolf of Gubbio

Today we remember St Francis, the much-loved friar of Assisi. One day, so the story goes, Francis was in a town called Gubbio, which was being terrorised by a lone wolf that would come out of the nearby forest and raid the houses, stealing food and frightening the children. The townspeople warned Francis that the wolf was dangerous and might attack him, but Francis went out to the forest on purpose to find it.

When they met, the wolf bared its teeth and growled at him, but Francis was not afraid of it - he understood that it was lonely and hungry. He simply reproached it for being a bad wolf, behaving in ways that God had not commanded, and asked it to say sorry. The wolf recognised instantly a man who was in total command of himself and of everything around him, and submitted to him immediately. The wolf flattened its ears and hung its head. Francis promised that if the wolf would vow never to raid the town and frighten the people again, the people would look after it and feed it every day.

The wolf offered its paw, and the people agreed. For at least the next two years, the wolf behaved perfectly, visiting the town every day and humbly asking to be fed, and the people always kept their side of the bargain. The wolf never hurt anyone, and the people grew to love it. Could this apparently romantic fairy story possibly be true?

Before you scoff, think of two points. (1) Centuries later, a skeleton of a large wolf was discovered buried in the church at Gubbio. (2) Wolves, like dogs, are pack animals, and cannot behave naturally outside a pack. Badly-behaved dogs can instantly recognise a natural pack leader, and gratefully fall into line. Francis was known to radiate his confidence in God in ways that appealed to everyone, perhaps especially to a lonely, hungry wolf.

Francis' compassion for animals and wildlife, whom he saw as literally his brothers and sisters, resonates strongly in New Zealand. Likewise, Maori revered Tane, god of the forest, who saw all tangata whenua, animal and human, as his children. Anglicans are much blessed to be able to link our two tikanga through these beautiful traditions.

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