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For discussion.

Do you agree that It is possible to understand our ability to communicate with, and relate to, other species as a natural consequence of our shared genes?.

And are those shared genes a natural consequence of whatever happened right at the beginning?.

Can the existence of "life" be understood a natural (inevitable?) consequence of creation as it began at the "Big Bang", as described by scientists? Is that all there is?

As Christians, we agree with some if this, but we also want to say that it is equally possible (more believable even) to understand the interconnectedness of all life as being the intentional result of the creative activity of God. He made all life out of the same basic material, described in Genesis chapter 1 as 'the dust of the earth'.



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 – including rats. Anglicans are much blessed to be able to link our two tikanga through these beautiful traditions.



THE WAIKATO CATHEDRAL CHURCH OF ST PETER
Te whare karakia matua o Pita Tapu ki Waikato

Theology of Creation

Notes for a Bible Study 6

November 22, 2020



THE WAIKATO CATHEDRAL CHURCH OF ST PETER

Te whare karakia matua o Pita Tapu ki Waikato

CATHEDRAL MINISTRY TEAM

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Views from the Pews Study 6: 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 came to 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.

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Theological reflection

An adult male rhinoceros weighs in at around three tonnes, and stands about 1.8 metres at the shoulder. It also has obvious weaponry and armour plating, so I suspect we would all agree that a rhino is a fearsome animal.

Imagine my surprise then, when I saw on TV, a keeper at Auckland Zoo stride across the rhino enclosure and give just such a beast a thorough telling off. However, even more surprising was the rhino's response. It cowered before the tirade like a sensitive child on the receiving end of a parental lecture. And, to add amazement to my surprise, was the feeling I had that the rhino, in its own way was saying "Sorry, sorry, please don't tell me off, I'll try to be good."

This event raises some important questions for me, similar to those raised by the Wolf of Gubbio story. How could a member of the species that traditionally believed itself to be a separate creation, superior to all mere animals, understand and relate to an animal of a quite different species like a rhinoceros? And vice versa we might add. Where does this empathy, that goes both ways, come from?

The answer, of course, as geneticists tell us, is that we share so much of the genetic building blocks, of which all mammals are made, that cross species relating should not surprise us.

Far from being unbelievable, the Wolf of Gubbio story is eminently believable. Cross species relationships are part and parcel of the normal fabric of life (sine God created it all). Ask any dog owner!