

ANIMALS

This Saturday marks St Francis Day and outside of the Bible, he is probably the best loved Christian in history. Francis took his faith very seriously, caring for the poor and living a life of poverty. He had a sense of the connectedness of creation and the need to care for our planet and these understandings were well ahead of their time.

But the thing that has most stuck in popular thought was his reputed care for (and rapport with) animals. Almost like an ecclesiastical Dr Dolittle. It's why St Francis Day is often marked by churches holding "*Blessing of the Animals*" services.

Although we haven't held any of these at Langside, I think there are things to be said for them.

An opportunity to give thanks for all the good that animals bring our way. They provide clothes and food, they offer transport and companionship. And we have to recognise that sometimes we humans mistreat animals, destroying their habitat, hunting them down and using them for experiments.

The BIG argument against an animal service is its unpredictability. Will the animals behave? Will they start biting each other? Will it be too noisy? And what sort of mess will be left behind?

This is what happens when you have a totally open invitation. That's what a church community is meant to be about. The church is open to all people. And so are the communities we all live in and the nation we are part of.

It might seem a tempting idea – to strive to surround ourselves with like-minded people and ignore the others. But the real world is not like that.

We are living together cheek by jowl in a group where we are **not** the same. We have different backgrounds, perspectives, beliefs and outlooks.

And yet it's only by meeting people who are different from us with different faiths and opinions that we learn the value of diversity, that we learn how to be tolerant, and accepting of difference.

When we can disagree with our neighbours and still be good friends, when we can respect the views of other people without abandoning our own, when we can open our minds to new truth and insight, and help to heal hurts and divisions we are going a long way to having a society where everyone fits.

An animal service might sound messy, but we humans already live in a messy, mixed world and we need to show tolerance and respect to make it work.