

Churches 'nowhere in animal welfare issues'

IT is said that true appreciation of history only comes with age.

Possibly, then, I was born old. As a young lad I was thrilled by stories of castle sieges, brave knights, secret passages and treachery. From an early age the quickest way to overthrow a besieged castle has been second nature to me: bribe a traitor to poison the castle well. Ideally this should be done with gold, in the dead of night, via a secret passage through the outer wall.

In my home city of Perth, Western Australia, the

closest thing to a castle was the Roundhouse Prison, built on the cliff above the first English prison ship as it lay at anchor, by sweating convicts under armed guard.

Hence, I'm always keen to explore the ancient castles, roman forts, and mediaeval ruins I seem to repeatedly encounter in my locuming adventures across the British Isles and I was quite thrilled to learn of the RSPCA Service for Animals at Westminster Abbey in October.

Dating back around 1,400 years, I would be hard-pressed to find a location more steeped in historical drama.

Officially, of course, by attending the service I would be doing my bit for the animals. In particular, I would be supporting the RSPCA. Few are aware that this renowned charity was established in 1824 by the Anglican priest Arthur Broome as a Christian society based on Christian principles.

Father Broome believed that Christian charity, if it was real, had to extend beyond human beings – a concept that remains far more controversial today than it should.

As an agnostic I had not attended a church service in living memory so it was with great interest and a little trepidation that I donned my Sunday best and passed within the Abbey's hallowed halls.

ANDREW KNIGHT recently found himself in church for the first time in living memory, for the RSPCA service for animals in the historical setting of Westminster Abbey



Beneath awe-inspiring gothic arches supported by ancient stone columns, I was surprised to discover the Abbey packed almost to capacity. Any hopes of getting a seat near the front quickly vanished, although it was heartening to see that so many people obviously cared about animals, particularly within a modern culture of declining church attendance.

I found a place on the end of a row, where I was handed a prayer book by an usher. Soon, I found myself attempting to sing my first hymns since boyhood. A strong voice somewhere behind my left shoulder revealed to my unfortunate neighbours just how bad my own singing really was. Thankfully, this was soon followed by two touching hymns from a children's choir, whose clear voices outshone even that of my unknown rival.

Next, the renowned theologian and Reverend Professor Andrew Linzey gave the keynote sermon. Also the director of the Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics, Prof. Linzey questioned the widely-held assumption that animal welfare is improving over time.

He noted progressive events, such as enormous increases in our scientific

understanding of morally-relevant animal characteristics, including their cognitive, communicative and social abilities. He acknowledged modern bans on hunting, fur-farming, veal crates, sow stalls, invasive great ape research, the current phase-out of battery cages, and the Animal Welfare Act (2006), which introduced an explicit "duty of care" for domestic animals.

In contrast, he noted the ongoing intensification of farming, and in particular recent attempts to establish "mega-dairies", in which thousands of cows would be housed in giant sheds devoid of natural light and pasture. Given that global meat production is set to double by 2050, such trends can only be expected to increase.

Prof. Linzey also noted recent steady rises in laboratory animal numbers, to levels not seen since the 1980s. He noted that cruelty complaints investigated by the RSPCA have risen from 137,245 in 2007, to 159,686 in 2010. "Is this because people are more sensitive," he asked, "or because they have become more callous?"

Political sluggishness

Prof. Linzey blamed the current government, whom he accused of "sheer political sluggishness", providing a litany of examples of their failure to act on animal welfare issues, sometimes in the face of considerable public support.

He went on to assert that, "The churches are nowhere in this debate. With a very few honourable exceptions, English archbishops and bishops have not addressed the issue in the past decade or more. Such



Rev. Prof. Andrew Linzey.

leaders, who are normally loquacious in lamenting regressive social policies, do not seem able to register animal cruelty as an issue... Christians have not got much further than thinking that the whole world was made for us, with the result that animals are seen only in an instrumental way as objects, machines,

tools, and commodities, rather than fellow creatures."

For this audience, however, the real stars of the show were always going to be police dogs Cleo and Bess from the Metropolitan Police sniffer unit, who visited with their police constable handlers. Not even the Abbey's own dean of dogs, Rex, who lives on the grounds with four less senior dogs and two cats, could upstage them.

We listened in our spellbound hundreds, as the constables described the amazingly in-depth training of these unpaid members of the force.

Yet, such animal use does raise important moral questions, for these dogs are, after all, not uncommonly used to sniff for bombs. Is it really ethical to subject these loyal animals to mortal hazard, when they are unaware of the risks, cannot provide informed consent, and do not receive commensurate recompense?

The ceremony closed with further hymns. And although I may not be Christian, I found I could empathise with some of the messages to a surprising degree, such as those encouraging greater appreciation of the amazing complexity of animals, and their lives.

The language may often seem archaic, but beneath the surface I suspect modern veterinarians such as me have more in common with ancient hymn-writers than we realise.

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