

Season of Creation 5 – Feast of St Francis

Three pigs (Job 12.7-10)

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I'm going to do something a little different today and order this homily around three poems about pigs.

Why pigs? I hope that will become clear in the reflection.

Why poetry? Well, the American poet Denise Levertov has said that: 'Insofar as poetry has a social function, it is to awaken sleepers by means other than shock'. Good poetry opens our eyes to see the world more truly; it tunes us into the subtler frequencies of feeling and reality, helps us realise what in some sense we already know, but haven't fully recognised. Poetry is a form of wisdom literature and in that sense, says Australian poet Les Murray, it is inherently 'religious'. It's not that there's something called 'poetry', a subset of which has devotional subject matter. Rather, good poetry is itself religious; it connects and reconnects us (*re-ligio*) to the whole of ourselves and our knowing; to the whole of reality. That's what I'm hoping might happen today as (by means of these poems) we think about our relationship with animals, and particularly domestic animals – the animals that work with and for us, that in so many ways succour and sustain us.

I don't know what actual interaction St Francis had with pigs, but in the imagination of American poet Galway Kinnell, his contact with one particular sow is profound. Kinnell wrote a poem about this connection, and it's this poem I'd like to begin with today.

Saint Francis and the Sow¹

*The bud
stands for all things,
even for those things that don't flower,
for everything flowers, from within, of self-blessing;
though sometimes it is necessary
to reteach a thing its loveliness,
to put a hand on the brow
of the flower
and retell it in words and in touch
it is lovely
until it flowers again from within, of self-blessing;
as Saint Francis
put his hand on the creased forehead
of the sow, and told her in words and in touch*

¹ Galway Kinnell was poet laureate for the state of Vermont from 1989 to 1993.

*blessings of earth on the sow, and the sow
began remembering all down her thick length,
from the earthen snout all the way
through the fodder and slops to the spiritual curl of the tail,
from the hard spininess spiked out from the spine
down through the great broken heart
to the blue milken dreaminess spurting and shuddering
from the fourteen teats into the fourteen mouths sucking and
blowing beneath them:
the long, perfect loveliness of sow.*

Well, I wonder how these words land for you; what they evoke in you? This is a poem ‘that acts on me cell by cell’, Roger Housden writes, in commentary (37).² ‘It softens me with a reverence for the living world, and brings me into the fold of all living things’, he says. And, I have to say, it does this to me too.

Of all animals, pigs are perhaps the most reviled. In the Torah, they were considered unclean and not to be eaten. ‘Don’t be a pig’, we said as kids, when someone was being greedy or disgusting. ‘We picture the pig, the sow, rolling in excrement, slobbering about in filth that no other self-respecting animal would dream of calling home. And yet, it is upon the pig, the *creased forehead* of this sow, that St Francis lays his hand, saying: *blessings of the earth on the sow.*’

‘This has to be the most exquisite appreciation of a sow ever written. You sense her heaviness, the slime on her snout; you can hear all the sucking and blowing of her offspring below her, the spurting of her milk into their mouths. Kinnell brings her so close you can almost smell the sweet mustiness of her breath.’ He makes us feel an intimate of this animal ... helps us to feel that, like us—like everything—she consists of both light and dark. She stretches all the way from earthen snout to the spiritual curl of tail.

Kinnell evokes the image of a cross here; first, the lateral movement from snout to tail, and then the transverse line – down from the *hard spininess* of the spine *down through the great broken heart*. ‘Broken perhaps by the weight of ... curses heaped upon her since time began, by the lowliness that others have foisted upon her, by feelings of ugliness and self-loathing that cling ... like a second skin. Some of us know how the sow must feel.’ And yet: ‘She comes, despite all this, and through this the blessing of Saint Francis and the earth, to remember—the *long, perfect loveliness of sow.*’ Remembers, not just as recall, but *all down her thick length*—in her being; that she’s perfect slops and all; that her sheer existence is enough to validate her being here; as she is, in her unique ‘sow-ness’.

² Roger Housden (2003) *Ten Poems to Open Your Heart*, Harmony Books, New York.

This poem invites such feeling for the sow, which is surely what Kinnell seeks to do. In a 2001 interview, Kinnell talked about seeing beyond the usual clichés of things: ‘Pig is a pejorative word’, he said, ‘but if you get to know them, get a feeling for them, you see that they have an extraordinary beauty. When creatures don’t have an extraordinary beauty, it’s because the person in contact with them is not seeing it.’

Saint Francis in this poem does see the sow and his tender touch and blessing undoes the ancient curse, enabling her to flower from within. Pertinently, the Eastern Orthodox tradition conceives of humanity having a priestly role in creation – naming, recognising and blessing creation, and in so doing, celebrating and liberating its fullest life. When we refuse this vocation it’s a problem for animals and how they’re treated. And for us, a symptom of alienation; not only from our fellow creatures but from the truth of our humanity.

It’s this alienation, this inability to see the beauty of a fellow creature, that comes through in a more confronting poem by Yorkshire poet, Ted Hughes.³

View of a Pig

*The pig lay on a barrow dead.
It weighed, they said, as much as three men.
Its eyes closed, pink white eyelashes.
Its trotters stuck straight out.*

*Such weight and thick pink bulk
set in death seemed not just dead.
It was less than lifeless, further off.
It was like a sack of wheat.*

*I thumped it without feeling remorse.
One feels guilty insulting the dead,
walking on graves. But this pig
did not seem able to accuse.*

*It was too dead. Just so much
a poundage of lard and pork.
Its last dignity had entirely gone.
It was not a figure of fun.*

*Too dead now to pity.
To remember its life, din, stronghold
of earthly pleasure as it had been,
seemed a false effort, and off the point.*

Too deadly factual. Its weight

³ Ted Hughes was poet laureate for England from 1984 until his death in 1998.

*oppressed me—how could it be moved?
And the trouble of cutting it up!
The gash in its throat was shocking, but not pathetic.*

*Once I ran at a fair in the noise
to catch a greased piglet
that was faster and nimbler than a cat,
its squeal was the rending of metal.*

*Pigs must have hot blood; they feel like ovens.
Their bite is worse than a horse's—
they chop a half-moon clean out.
They eat cinders, dead cats.*

*Distinctions and admirations such
as this one was long finished with.
I stared at it a long time. They were going to scald it,
scald it and scour it like a doorstep.*

I find this an awkward poem to be with. In contrast to ‘Saint Francis and the Sow’ there’s no warmth or loveliness here. The tone is matter of fact; callous. I don’t like it. At the same time, I don’t find it altogether foreign, although I wish I did. In Hughes’ detachment, in his viewing of this pig as an object, I recognise a part of myself. It’s how I view the hapless wombat or kangaroo lying dead and bloated on the side of the road, marked with spray paint, awaiting removal; and those carcasses hanging pink and white at the back of the butcher’s shop. I shut down. It’s too hard to be present; fully present, vulnerable.

In Hughes’ view, this once vital, life-beaming animal is reduced to a lump, a *less than lifeless* object – *a poundage of lard and pork*. He wrote this poem in 1959, worried about the growth of factory farming and what this meant for our relationship with the animals we eat. A mark of indigenous peoples, like the Bushmen of the Kalahari, is the way they honour and thank the animals they kill. In factory farming, where production and profit are the highest values, there’s no such reverence. These animals frequently have terrible lives – crammed into harsh, unsanitary and unnatural spaces; drugged, mutilated, terrorised and then slaughtered. In some places, laws are changing to improve their ‘lot’ but things are by no means sorted, and the fundamental attitude of alienation remains. To cope with this reality, mostly we evade it—keep it out of view.

The third poem, titled poignantly ‘Animals are passing from our lives’ was written by US poet Philip Levine. It touches on similar themes, but unlike Hughes’ view of a

pig, Levine offers a *pig's* view, a *pig's* voice. In an introduction to the poem, he wrote:

In 1965, I lived in Spain, very close to what was there called the 'abattoir' – the slaughterhouse. And I used to see animals driven to the slaughterhouse. Not driven in trucks, but driven on the ground - they walked. And they seemed somehow to anticipate something good wasn't waiting for them.

Animals are Passing From our Lives

*It's wonderful how I jog
on four honed-down ivory toes
my massive buttocks slipping
like oiled parts with each light step.*

*I'm to market. I can smell
the sour, grooved block, I can smell
the blade that opens the hole
and the pudgy white fingers*

*that shake out the intestines
like a hankie. In my dreams
the snouts drool on the marble,
suffering children, suffering flies,
suffering the consumers
who won't meet their steady eyes
for fear they could see. The boy
who drives me along believes*

*that any moment I'll fall
on my side and drum my toes
like a typewriter or squeal
and shit like a new housewife*

*discovering television,
or that I'll turn like a beast
cleverly to hook his teeth
with my teeth. No. Not this pig.*

No. Not *this pig*. *This pig's* got attitude! Dignity! Once again, this poem confronts, although in a different manner than Hughes'. There's more energy here, more engagement. *This pig*, though being 'led' to the slaughterhouse (a casualty of human demand), is determined to see it through, without evasion. And, as I hear

this pig, my propensity to detach and evade is checked. ‘Even though he knows he's dying for an appalling society, he's not going to beg for his life’, Levine once said.⁴

They're not going to make a pig out of him. They call him a pig, they treat him like a pig, they'll kill him like a pig, but he's going to act with more dignity than a human being.

Such irony here. And, in so being, *this pig* calls me to respect; to reverence him *and* his fellow suffering creatures; my fellow creatures.

‘Ask the beasts and they will teach you’, God says to Job (12:7). What do I learn from these three pigs, beloved of God? Fully, to answer that would take more time and space than we have here and now, but perhaps I can hint at it with words from another great modern poet, Wendell Berry – who is also a farmer and environmental activist. In his book *The Gift of Good Land*, Berry wrote:

We cannot live harmlessly at our own expense; we depend on other creatures and survive by their deaths. To live, we must daily break the body and shed the blood of Creation. The point is, when we do this knowingly, lovingly, skillfully, reverently, it is a sacrament; when we do it ignorantly, greedily, clumsily, destructively, it is a desecration.⁵

On this Feast of St Francis, this day when we are invited to bless the animals with whom we share our lives, let us remember that blessing another requires being fully present—really listening, really seeing; recognising, revering and evoking their beauty—‘the long, perfect loveliness of sow’. Amen.

⁴ From an interview with David Remnick, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 1980.

⁵ From *The Gift of Good Land: Further Essays Cultural and Agricultural*, North Point Press, 1983.