

## Homily    Blessing and Blissing

In the beginning, the old stories say, when the heavens and earth were in formation, before there was anything, a great darkness lay on the deep, and a mighty wind moved across the emptiness. And a voice said "Let there be light," and the incandescence of a billion galaxies fluoresced into existence. And the Creator saw that the light was good, shiny, bright, radiating at 186,000 miles per second throughout the entire universe.

And so God decided to make some more of this stuff, everything emerging in a blinding flash, with carbon and nitrogen and oxygen (which along with hydrogen from the Big Bang constituted the building blocks of life) all baked in the bellies of exploding stars. And from these ingredients the seas were laid down, then the hills and mountains and forests that were filled on each successive day with unimaginable creatures: elephants and tigers in the jungles of Asia, buffalo on the broad plains of the American southwest, and birds in numbers that darkened the skies in their annual migrations. And on the continental shelves of the oceans, the coral reefs were formed, home to the sea turtles who fed on the shallow bottom grass.

Each day the Creator labored, the old legends say, and each day the Creator saw that the Earth was good, an excellent habitation. No part of it was superfluous. No species was throw-away or expendable. Every bird and beast and fish added to the Maker's delight. All was of superior quality, as the old myths tell it.

And on the sixth day, God made people, blessed the whole creation, and gave the people the green growing plants to eat because in the beginning, all beings lived in peace and none preyed on the others. And then God rested and blessed it all again because it was such a fantastic world.

And this is what it means to bless and be blessed: to feel an outpouring of wonder and gratitude for life and all existence. Because the word bless is related to the word bliss. One dictionary relates both to the word blithe, which means merry, upbeat, exuberant. To be blessed, to experience a sense of bliss, means that we feel deeply happy just to be alive, just to exist, just to waken one more day and feel ourselves a part of this stupendous creation.

Don't animals teach us about blessing, about joy? *Alegre, alegre, alegre.* They remind us to be satisfied with what we have. Not one is worried about the stock market. Not one wants to run for Congress or govern the animal kingdom. None brags that their religion is better than their neighbor's. Not one torments themselves with unanswerable riddles or, after I die, then what? Because for

them, each day is sufficient for itself. Each is satisfied with just a little. None needs a passport or travel documents or immigration papers. Because they don't live in a state like Arizona or Texas that cares about such things. They live in a state of bliss.

The idea that animals can be our guides and teachers is really far from new. The Bible says that when Adam was first formed out of the dust of the ground, God saw that he was by himself, and God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner. So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air." At least as originally intended, we're told, animals were made to be our companions—our partners and not our possessions. In the Hebrew, it says that God made Adam a "living soul," *nefesh chaya*. And God made animals, too, *nefesh chayam*, "living souls." For ancient people there was no distinction between the two-legged and four-legged. Animals are ours to enjoy and care for, but not ours to exploit or abuse, at least not in my version of holy writ.

Compassion, I believe, is close of the heart of every major world religion. One of my favorite stories in this regard comes from the holy book of the Hindus, the *Mahabharata*. The *Mahabharata* is about as old as the Hebrew Bible, certainly older than the Christian, but it's much, much longer than either one and contains stories within stories, like the *Bhagavad Gita*, which inspired those like Gandhi. It's a sprawling tale of dynasties and battles and kings and successions, but at its core it's a story of pilgrimage, a search for enlightenment, wisdom, immortality and self-realization. The hero of the story is named Yuhisthira, and at the very end of the book, in the very last chapter of this long, long saga, Yuhisthira has finally reached his goal. He's overcome all his trials and obstacles and struggles and reached the end of his journey. He has attained the summit of the very highest peak of the Himalayas (the mountain symbolizing transcendence and the eternal). All his brothers and traveling companions have fallen by the wayside, carried down by the weight of their karmic debts and sins. But Yuhisthira, our protagonist, is upright and pure and true, righteous and steadfast of character. And when Yuhisthira finally reaches the tippy-top of the mountain, the pinnacle, he finds Indra, the king of the gods, waiting for him there with a golden chariot. Indra says to Yuhisthira, "Well done, congratulations, you've made it all this way and proved yourself worthy of paradise. I've brought this chariot to usher you into the realm of eternal bliss. Please climb in and we'll be on our way. But, Indra says, I see that you've brought a dog with you, and I'm sorry to tell you that we have a strict rule. No dogs are allowed in heaven. They're not worthy of immortality, so you'll just have to leave your dog outside the Pearly Gates while we go inside. Then Yuhisthira complains to Indra. "This dog," he says, "has

been beside me through thick and thin. He's shared all my hardships. He's been faithful and and loyal and brave. I can't just leave him sitting here by himself. That would not be compassionate, and compassion is the central precept of the Vedas, our oldest most sacred scriptures. But Indra insists that a rule is a rule and no dogs are permitted in paradise. Well, Yuhisthira says, if that really is the case, I guess you can keep your old chariot and go on back to the land of the gods where you came from. I'm going to stay out here with my canine companion. So Yuhisthira sacrifices his one chance for immortality to stay with his beloved friend. And of course this had all been the final test, the final ordeal to gauge the mettle of our hero. The dog, whose name is Svana, morphs at this point into a deity and ascends into the sky to become the Dog Star that we call Sirius, the brightest of the stars in the night sky. And Yuhisthira likewise ascends with Indra into the celestial realms of perfection and delight. So man and mutt enter paradise together.

Of course, it's just a myth, just a legend, like the Creation myth of Genesis. But it does contain a deeper truth, that it's in the bonds we share with our animal friends, in the unconditional love and loyalty and affection we experience there, that we mortals get a little taste of bliss, a tiny glimpse of what heaven might be like.