

## **“Extending .....Compassion to God’s Creation”**

**Scott B. Martin - April 19, 2009**

All of us have been around church long enough to know that Jesus made a connection between loving God and loving our neighbor as our selves. Extending compassion and love to our fellow human beings is the hallmark of any religious person’s life. As Paul said, without it we are a noisy gong, or a clanging cymbal. But we are not to stop there. We are to called to extend our compassion and love not only to our fellow human beings but to our fellow creatures in this world, to God’s good earth itself.

The Great Baptist preacher Dr. Charles Spurgeon once reinforced the view of Rowland Hill, who said that person **“was not a true Christian if his dog or cat were not the better off for it.”** Spurgeon said, **“that witness is TRUE.”** Spurgeon said these words back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Long before Spurgeon St. Frances spoke of God’s creatures as being his “brothers” in 12<sup>th</sup> century. Long, long before that our ancient brothers and sisters in the Hebrew faith included domesticated animals in their vision of the Sabbath. The oxen, like their owners, were not to work on the Sabbath and when they were working grinding grain the oxen were to be unmuzzled, so they could eat some of the grain they were grinding. So you can see the concern for God’s creatures is not some new fangled theology. It has always been part of what it means to be a religious person. How we treat our dog and cat, or any other pet, is indeed part of our Christian witness. Beyond that, how we treat God’s creation is part of our Christian witness.

Thanks to a 2007 movie we are all aware of the part William Wilberforce played in the abolition of slavery, how he worked tirelessly for 19 years as member of the British parliament to achieve abolition. What is not as

widely known is his work in helping to establish the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. For Wilberforce injustice towards animals was to be fought just as much as injustice towards one's fellow human beings.

Even less known is the driving force who came up with the idea for the SPCA in 1824, an Anglican priest named Rev. Arthur Broome. He gathered fellow clergy and men like Wilberforce in Old Slaughter's Coffee House. By the time the meeting was over it was resolved to develop materials to help clergy be able to preach sermons that could encourage the public to be more compassionate towards their fellow creatures. They resolved to inspect markets and slaughterhouses to make sure animals were not being treated cruelly. They also resolved to look into the conduct of coachmen towards their horses. It has always been the responsibility of churches to encourage compassionate action in society. Some might call it meddling in politics and business, but really it is simply an attempt to put faith into action, so that religion becomes more than a ritualistic tradition, or worse become what Karl Marx said religion was, the opiate of the masses, that did its best to maintain the injustices of the status quo. There is something to be learned from all this for our day as well and the role that we as people of faith can play.

At first the SPCA did not receive much support, financial or otherwise. Rev. Broome was so committed to the SPCA's mission that he gave up his calling as pastor of his church to work full time for the SPCA. When the society ran out of money, he used his own funds, to the point that when the Society was 300 pounds in debt he was thrown into debtors prison in January 1826! In a marvelous example of British understatement a historian wryly commented on Broome's imprisonment, "a most unfortunate position

for a clergyman.” Fortunately, the society and Broome’s friends scrapped together enough money to eventually pay off his debts and get him out. Since that time the work of the SPCA has spread worldwide. The first SPCA was started in this country in 1866 in New York city. Broome’s Christian witness has born fruit and spread compassion for God’s creatures worldwide. Sadly, not much is known about Rev. Broome. It is not even known where he is buried.

I hope this all doesn’t sound like ancient history. We are talking about an incredible Christian witness from the long history of the Church. This Christian witness still speaks to Christians like you and I today. It raises the question, “Does our lifestyle and the way we treat our fellow creatures, both domestic and wild, witness to our faith as Christians?” Furthermore, “What impact does our lifestyle have on God’s creation?” “What are we doing to fight pollution, species extinction, global warming, etc.?” “What are we doing to try and pass on to our children and our children’s children a world in which all of God’s creatures can live in harmony and peace?” As with any Christian witness it will involve commitment, prayer, study, and at times, sacrifice. May God strengthen us and help us to be a more compassionate people and extend that compassion not only towards our fellow human beings but towards all our fellow creatures, indeed to creation itself. Amen.