St Francis’ Day,
4 October 2020

If you search the internet for “cute animal videos”,
Aunty Google will return more than 216 million results.

I can only imagine that this was not quite what
the people who collectively dreamed up the internet envisaged.

They probably imagined that the internet was
a very useful tool for serious and important stuff.

But the viewing rate of cute animal content is **so high**,
that actual, proper research has been done
to try to understand why.

Some argue the positive psychological effects
that **pets have on their owners**
also holds true for animal images viewed online.

Pets certainly have a positive psychological effect
on their people. But not just pets.

The presence of fish in a tank at the dentist’s
is believed to lower stress levels.
Goldfish that is, not piranhas.

I saw a story this week which tickled my fancy.

A guy called Stuart lived in Seattle.
A family of crows had nested in a large Douglas fir tree
in the front yard of his home.
They had been there about four years, and they had
a couple of rowdy, hungry baby chicks.
Stuart “loved to listen to the excited chirping
of the baby crows. But, one day he went outside
and immediately realized something was wrong.
Both chicks had fallen from their nest,
and their parents were unable to help them.”

He said,

“[The chicks] were almost able to fly,
but instead [they] were just running around the yard —
their parents squawking,”
“I caught the two of them and got them into a tree.
I put some food and water underneath them
in case they fell again.”

Stuart’s action did not go unnoticed.
The adults seemed frantic and angry.
And they seemed to begin paying more attention to their human neighbours.

Did you know this?

Crows have the ability to recognize human faces.
This helps them to remember which humans are threats
and which are friends.
Which also presumably means they can hold a grudge.

Stuart continued to leave snacks at the base of the fir tree for the feathered family.
One day he noticed what looked like a bit of rubbish on the ground where he had been leaving the food.
When he went to pick it up he saw that it was
the metal pull tab off a drink can,
with a sprig of fir from the tree threaded through it.

It seemed odd.
And the next day there was another one in the same place: “This is when it dawned on him that the crows were leaving thank you gifts. Not just random gifts,
but something they had **crafted**. A treasure.

Phenomenal.

Since that day, the crows’ relationship with Stuart
has grown. “They follow when he goes for a walk,
landing on the wires above his head.
“The adult male … is very amiable and will fly sometimes within a few feet, swooping by to say, 'Here I am!'”

This seemed like such an appropriate story for
the day in which we celebrate Francis of Assisi,
the patron saint of animals.

Francis’ relationship with nature was underpinned by
an all pervading belief in God as Creator.

He experienced God through everything that God created -
that is, the beauty of this world and all who live in it.
He was shaped by an understanding that
the birth of Christ as a human – the incarnation –
was a profound affirmation of the goodness of creation.
He saw this goodness in all living and created things, whether flowers and vegetables, birds and animals,
or the poor and sick.

Saint Francis praised the Artist in every one of his works. He delighted in all the works of God’s hands,
[not just for their own beauty
but for the source of that beauty, namely God.]
To Francis **all things were good**.
By tracing God the creator’s fingerprints
in the beauty of creation, Francis followed God
wherever God led.

Around the year 1224, when Francis was in his early 40s,
he wrote a poem known as the Canticle of the Sun
or the Canticle of Creation.
In it he expresses the holiness of nature,
and the presence of God in the created order.
Francis calls out to all of creation as brother and sister, revealing the core of the Franciscan worldview:
that God is the source of all being;
that the Creator God is the Parent;
that all creatures therefore are brother and sister to one another; that everything deserves our love and respect.

Listen, then, to Francis’ Canticle - these words are eight centuries old, but speak with remarkable resonance today.

*O Most High, all-powerful, good Lord God,*

*to you belong praise, glory,*

*honour and all blessing.*

*Be praised, my God, for all your creation*

*and especially for our Brother Sun,*

*who brings us the day and the light;*

*he is strong and shines magnificently.*

*O God, we think of you when we look at him.*

*Be praised, my God, for Sister Moon,*

*and for the stars*

*which you have set shining and lovely*

*in the heavens.*

*Be praised, my God,*

*for our Brothers Wind and Air*

*and every kind of weather*

*by which you, God,*

*uphold life in all your creatures.*

*Be praised, my God, for Sister Water,*

*who is very useful to us,*

*and humble and precious and pure.*

*Be praised, my God, for Brother Fire,*

*through whom you give us light in the darkness:*

*he is bright and lively and strong.*

*Be praised, my God,*

*for Sister Earth, our Mother,*

*who nourishes us and sustains us,*

*bringing forth*

*fruits and vegetables of many kinds*

*and flowers of many colours.*

*Be praised, my God,*

*for those who forgive for love of you;*

*and for those*

*who bear sickness and weakness*

*in peace and patience*

*- you will grant them a crown.*

*Be praised, my God, for our Sister Death,*

*whom we must all face.*

*I praise and bless you, God,*

*and I give thanks to you,*

*and I will serve you in all humility.*

Francis is perhaps the best known Saint in the world.
And his vision is most critical for us at this time in history. Can we learn to see creation – all created things –
as our brother and our sister,
now desperately in need of healing and care?
Can we learn to understand ourselves as part of a great, living, interrelated whole?
Can we fall in love with God’s creation, as Francis did,
and treasure it?

Well, perhaps we could begin, one cute video,
or one baby crow at a time.