



## **Carol Service for Pets – Saturday 29 December 2018**

### **Canon Alan Bashforth**

Bounce, our Border Collie was 14 years old in September of this year - so in human years I reckon that it is now around his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday – though I am not sure he is expecting a card from the queen.

He is old – but not the least bit grumpy. That said, his arthritis is both expensive in terms of the medication he has to take – nods of sympathy here from dog owners the world over- and inconvenient for him. One thing he really does not like much is a hard floor and so I have saved him from a journey to the Cathedral today – instead I brought his stand in.

Bounce – the real one not this one - came from a farm in Devon and his parents were cattle dogs – and if he could speak - which after all these years of living with him he almost can in the things that he does and the way that he does them – I think he would have a thing or to say about our traditional depiction of the nativity.

Cattle, Donkeys, sheep and lambs brought by shepherds but not a single sheepdog – how likely is that - surely there is something missing. And perhaps just to prove that he is not biased to his own kind – just a bit speciesist – if that's a word - I think he might wonder why there is not a cat or two making sure that the stable was fit for temporary human habitation.

But back home we've corrected that and, on a hillside, just beyond our stable, near a few sheep and an odd angel we know have a border collie – perhaps yapping along with the voices of the heavenly host – in his own way praising God.

But if Border Collies really are missing from the nativity scene – and I admit that I might be stretching a point there - as I have never seen that many of them on my trips to Israel – it is undoubtedly the case that without our Pets a great deal would be missing from our lives.

And perhaps in that there is a tie in with the Christmas story.

The remarkable tale of God coming as a child to live out a life like your life and my life, is a tale of God going on loving. Despite the fact that judges and prophets and Priests and Kings tried to carry his message - it seemed that people only listened for a short while before they went back to doing things their own way. In the end in Jesus he came himself and, in many ways, the whole biblical story is a tale of God's insatiable desire - despite the odds - to bring everyone to salvation - and perhaps not just everyone but everything - the whole of that wonderful thing called creation.

And God in Jesus very rarely says change first and I will love you - he rather says love me and I will change you. His love is offered in the first instance without condition - we are embraced as we are in the hope of what we might become - and even when at times we stop listening and plough our own furrow once again - God waits in Jesus for the opportunity to embrace us again. That in a nut shell is the good news of Christmas, Hopefully we do learn as we go - as we are forgiven again - and we see something of the ideal of unconditional forgiving love.

Now it is a fact that we live in a complex world - a world saved but where that salvation is not yet complete - and in our human interactions - as we think of each other's motives and drivers we can end up suspicious at times of the affection offered to us. But perhaps above all other kinds of love it is hard to be suspicious of what appears to be the unconditional love offered to us by our dependent animals. It is an undoubted fact that a good many people would have been lonelier this Christmas without that love and companionship offered to their lives by their non-human friends.

It is sometimes in their love that we see most readily a love not unlike the self-giving love of God.

Perhaps, then, they are more than companions - they are an example to us, as we keep trying to follow on the way of Christ - and reflect something of his love in our lives.