

There is a particular branch of biological science called ethology. Something akin to a grown-up version of pigeon-fancying, ethology is the scientific study of the behaviour of animals. It takes as its subject matter the behaviour patterns of our furry, feathered and scaly cousins; the courtship displays, the nest-building, the top-dog, pack-leader hierarchies. Entirely coincidentally, this is the field in which Richard Dawkins made his name before he became famous playing the tiresome heckler in the billious back row.

As you might expect from a pursuit followed by a species as self-obsessed as humanity, much ethological endeavour is directed towards understanding what our four-or-more legged friends can tell us about ourselves. So in the ethological world, the bizarre mating rituals of puffed-chest bull-frogs and fan-tailed popinjay birds have their parallels in the lunacies of the lovestruck and complex displays of the disco & the dance hall: the picket fence and parking rage for ethology, just a different version of a bad-tempered shrieking gull noisily defending its sliver of guano-streaked cliff-side real-estate.

Needless to say, ethology is prone to being rather limited in its purview of human nature and apt to lapse into plain silliness: however daft humans may be we are not after all pigeons or gannets. But there is no denying that man is an animal and therefore we share much in common with other animals, and much of what we do is a direct consequence of this.

For several months when I was a curate in Leigh on Sea I had the company of a small canine companion while his owner was otherwise engaged and thus day in day out I found myself myself face to face with animal nature. Please don't tell Xin: I'm sure he thinks he's the only dog that's ever been in my life. Anyway, joyfully, the owner of this pooch managed to not be able to look after his dog while he (the dog) was still in house training, so after that particular hands-on ethological field study, I can see the animal-human

similarities. Toby was the terrier's name: he share's his name with many human males and the similarities do not end there. He likes company, he likes regular meals, he gets bored, he doesn't like a fox or a cat obstructing his view. So far so similar. But then there are the dissimilarities. Toby does not really reason, he does not think things through, he was not really aware that after a few weeks with the curate he widdled in the garden and not on the carpet. Toby displayed affection, a great deal of excited dribbling woofing affection indeed when I was holding a biscuit or some other desirable treat, but I could not really say at any point that he 'loved' me or indeed anyone else.

Now one might have thought that, if were asked to name the attributes we share with our animal cousins then cupboard love- affection in the presence of biscuits, food, bones, money etc. - would be pretty close to top of the list, but, surprisingly, I would suggest, it is not. I think much of the time we don't even get that far.

Cupboard love, unedifying and mercenary though it may be, at least has the virtue of acknowledging the source of the goodies, as long as the treats keep coming. Although XIn of course loves me for who I am, I knew that what Toby was really interested in was the contents of his food bowl, not me, but he did recognise that the bowl does not fill itself. But as bewildered politicians will attest, we've never really mastered the rules of the cupboard.

'You've never had it so good' cries the vote-seeker

'So what?' is the reply.

This is not because we- unlike Toby- are biting the hand that feeds us. It is simply a reflection of the fact that we are sublimely unaware that anyone *is* feeding us. We are each the proud possessors of a magic bowl. Isn't it amazing? It just fills itself!

Well of course, no, there is no magic bowl, but certainly, as the richer people in the richer countries of the West we are so used to our bowls being full that it just seems to be the natural state of thing. Do we love God more because we have enough to eat? Because our own storehouses are full, because for us all is safely gathered in, because our bellies are distended not empty, because the main form of malnutrition in the West is obesity. Because of all this, do we love God more than those who don't? Well no. We can't even do cupboard love properly.

The bowl is always full: perhaps then that is the nature of the bowl, it is the natural state of the bowl to be full, it has evolved to be that way, it fills itself. To entertain us, let the poets pipe about the force that through the green fuse drives the flower, but what a childish belief indeed that there is something else more than the bowl in the equation! What need for God, when the bowl fills itself?

Yes, it is easy to take a swipe at the rich of the West: we are, after all, an increasingly bigger, increasingly sitting, target that is increasingly difficult to miss. But the sobering reality is that the magic bowl syndrome is nothing new, it is not something invented by the success of industrial agriculture, by MacDonaldis, Bernard Matthews and Joe Sainsbury.

Half the story of the Old Testament is that of the national attention deficit disorder of Ancient Israel, the limited attention span of God's chosen people that all too quickly flits away from God, as the attractions and distractions of not-Gods come and go. Witness the sheer wilful perversity of the Golden Calf; the Baals and high places; the royal corruption of Chronicles and Kings; the willing apostasy under Antiochus Epiphanes. See how quickly five thousand fed is forgotten, how attractive the jingling sound thirty pieces of silver make; see how only one cleansed leper out of ten

comes back to say thanks. We have always been in an unseemly rush to believe in the magic bowl.

The more storehouses we build, the more we only ever see storehouses. Eventually our vision is filled with storehouses, all we can see is our wealth and we can no longer see God.

In the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus says quite bluntly, Blessed are you poor. And perhaps the poor are blessed because they know from brutal experience that there is no such thing as a magic bowl; *that* is a deceitful luxury that only the rich can afford. If your bowl is rarely anything other than empty, it becomes quite obvious that it does not fill itself. And lost of that particular delusion, perhaps one can then see clearly that there is only one source of all things, one creator, sustainer, enlivener and redeemer, one God. Maybe then, we can start to offer a grateful, generous, clear-sighted and unselfish response, a true kind of cupboard love.

So, as we come to celebrate harvest, let us truly celebrate. Let us celebrate not the ease and comforts of our lives, the fullness of our bowls, the good things that we enjoy. Instead, let us celebrate the source of those good things and Himself the ultimate good.