

There are 170 mentions of oxen in the Bible, old, new testament and apocrypha. That's quite a few cows. Mostly they feature being cut up and burned because God is supposed to like the smell of radically barbecued beef, but not every bovine appearance is burning butchery and 170 makes for a lot of cud-chewers. There are scarcely fewer horses, however, our equestrian friends clocking in at 169 mentions. Then there are 147 goats, 43 dogs, 31 dragons, 25 snakes, 16 pigs, 14 roosters, 2 each of monkeys and rats, one rabbit and, alas, no tigers. The observant may recognise that the membership of the apparently random menagerie I have conjured up this morning, corresponds to the twelve animals of the Chinese Zodiac, but although that looks deliberate, Augustine Zhao Rong notwithstanding, it is entirely coincidental. I am not looking for biblical backing for an exploration of the year of the rooster today; rather I want start our weekly Mass meditation by talking about rabbits, and thanks to that one bunny merrily hopping among the rocks in Psalm 104, I feel I can do so and still claim to be a Bible-based preacher.

So, rabbits are not simply cute, they are quite fascinating creatures. Highly social, always resourceful, they are one of nature's great success stories, and given even half a chance will happily overrun a continent. Gentle natured they make good pets; for those not enamoured with their cuteness they will- obviously unwillingly- provide fur for the naked, food for the hungry and lucky charm feet key rings for the gullible. A rare breed of bunny prized for its pink and purple fur lays chocolate easter eggs.

Less well known rabbit party tricks include coprophagia, which is an activity that looks for all the world like eating your own poo, but is, definitely chewing the cud and reverse pregnancy, where pregnant rabbit- and that is a near permanent state for most does- can reabsorb her unborn litter if the warren cannot at the moment cope with more mouths to feed.

If there's enough food however, those babies, which rabbits produce in happy profusion in litters of anything from one to a dozen are called kittens and though they are just as cute as cat kittens, they are not quite as manic.

Now dogs were beyond the pale in my childhood home, and cats held a lower place in the maternal hierarchy than the fleas they

were known to harbour; mice, gerbils and hamsters smelled and had to be kept indoors, but rabbits living outside, were acceptable and so for much of my childhood I kept rabbits. An unintended consequence of this childhood pursuit, was that one day I answered the door to a friend of a friend of a classmate who presented me with a biscuit tin, inside of which was a litter of baby rabbits, scant days old and smelling slightly of smoke. 'Can you look after them?' he said 'Their mother was killed in a hutch fire and we know you've got rabbits'. So taken was I with those small seven baby rabbits-six multicoloured and one one colour-, that I immediately agreed to be surrogate mother, without questioning any further the rather sinister circumstances of their arrival. I mean how on earth does one end up having a fire in a rabbit hutch? You can hardly blame an unattended chip pan or the electric blanket. Still, hardly unique in the North of England, I was now, at the age of twelve, a parent.

Baby rabbits are difficult to hand rear, but it can sometimes be done. They really only need two things: food and warmth. Warmth pretty much comes with the territory: they are gregarious creatures who like to huddle together and come in convenient family packs. Food is frequent small meals of milk.

Well, feeding underway, it proved that the one colour rabbit was by far the greediest, always pushing his siblings out of the way in his eagerness to guzzle, and though his siblings were still fed, they had less than their gourmand brother. And as the days passed, I would sometimes discover a cold kitten in the morning. One by one, the litter shrank as the baby rabbits died until just one was left: not surprisingly this was the big, greedy one colour rabbit. Now, no need to push and hustle: all the food was his. Nevertheless, not soon after all his siblings had gone to the great warren in the sky, so he too went the way of all rabbit flesh. Having eaten as much as he could of his siblings food in order to stay alive, he died without the warmth his brothers and sisters provided.

Well that's a sad little tale, so let's whisk ourselves off somewhere altogether happier, take our minds off the poor little bunnies and cheer ourselves up. Come on, let's go. Picture this scene... of a banqueting hall, brightly lit by the glitter of a thousand candles dancing in crystal chandeliers. There is one long table, set to seat hundreds. Each place setting is surrounded by a halo of gleaming

silver cutlery: a knife, fork and spoon for every course, row upon row. The napkins are folded expertly in extravagant origami and the centrepiece of the table is a breathtaking ice sculpture. From the kitchens waft unbelievably rich aromas and when the doors swing silently open you briefly catch the sounds of a busy kitchen, someone talking in French making some serious food. You realise this is no gathering of Temperance Methodists, you can see on the side an astonishing collection of obscenely expensive wines, in coolers or uncorked and breathing as is most appropriate. There are serving staff lined up waiting, uniforms spotless and immaculate, ready to serve the sumptuous repast. Nothing has been left to chance, no detail has been overlooked, nothing has been too small not to merit the hosts' attention, it is without doubt the perfect banquet. There's just one, small thing. Just a tiny thing really. You really don't want to mention it; with all this effort gone in it would seem churlish, cruel almost to even mention it, but... has anyone been invited? Someone's gone to a lot of trouble, but forgotten one of the basics of the successful dinner party: the guests.

OK. Three, two, one you're back in the room.

What we're thinking about this morning, with both our fantasy buffet and our real-life baby rabbits are those oh-so-easy ways of being Christians which will tempt us all but prove to be really ways of not being Christians.

With Jesus, we have found the choicest meal; ambrosia, nectar; not chicken soup this is caviar for the soul and the temptation is to just sit there stuffing ourselves. So often we can be that one-colour rabbit, concerned to feed ourselves, greedy for all we can cram in, only too late realising that the world is becoming colder and colder. A rabbit kitten needs to be part of a litter if it is to survive and thrive; and so the Christian needs other Christians around her is she is to be a happy bunny. Faith can never be just about 'what God gives to me': the more it is 'just about me' the more we demand our needs are met, the less our faith feeds us. In one regard those baby rabbits are luckier than us: they start out with their siblings already there, whereas we have to go out and find them for ourselves. We cannot sit here by ourselves guzzling the rich food of the Gospel: that food is only there if we share. There are no individual-sized portions here. There is only one cup. Often

Christian fellowships end up being geared just to feeding the needs of those who are already members; sometimes individual Christians can be found restlessly flitting from fellowship to fellowship looking for the best food; neither is what Jesus asks of his followers. Often Christian fellowships have understood the sharing bit: they throw everything they have into providing the best meal for the biggest number of people: but no-one thinks to send out the invites. Which, it doesn't need saying, is rather defeating the point.

When Jesus calls his disciples it is with the words 'follow me and I will make you fishers of men.' We have work to do, we have nets to cast: it is not till all the guests are at their places that we can sit down to eat.

When you have met Jesus, suddenly, you are in a relay race. You are a spectator no longer. He's handed you the baton. You can't just stand there with a grin on your face, admiring the stick, pleased he's picked you. You've got to pass it on. You've *got* to pass it on. Or the game's over, the team disbanded and the race is lost.

I know the summer hols are just starting. It's the one and only time of the year anyone ever bursts into an Alice Cooper song. You're looking forward to putting your feet up. It's great. But remember there is never a break from being a Christian.

It doesn't have to be hard. Races can be run in baby steps and still be won. As long as the tortoise doesn't hibernate, he can still beat the hare. Even at this church, we can try to lengthen our stride, increase our pace, up our game. Nudge a neighbour. Smile at the stranger who's just taken your pew. Support the initiatives which see us trying to look out. It doesn't have to be hard. Just a change of perspective. More opportunities will come to be fishers: we must grab them with both hands. It's what Jesus wants. Don't be shy. I know what your gifts are, I know what you are really like and you have *nothing* to be shy about.

*Fr Andrew Fenby 2017*