

CVVUK NEWSLETTER

Welcome to the Christian Vegetarians and Vegans UK newsletter, Autumn/Winter 2024



Website: <http://www.christian-vegetariansvegans.org.uk/>

We hope you enjoy this newsletter. As always we would be pleased to receive any of the following from our supporters for future newsletters:

- interesting (short) articles;
- news of any local activities you have been involved in to promote the values of CVVUK;
- information about events that might interest other CVVUK supporters; and
- miscellaneous items such as book reviews, recipes and information about useful resources

If you have anything that you would like to contribute to the next newsletter please e-mail it to us at sampsons@dsl.pipex.com by the end of February 2025.

Miriam and Philip Sampson

Disclaimer: The information in this newsletter comes from a variety of sources and reasonable care has been taken to convey it accurately. Please note that opinions or statements may not reflect the views held by all members of CVAUK, and we accept no responsibility for any errors which may have occurred. Content is produced for information only and is not advice.

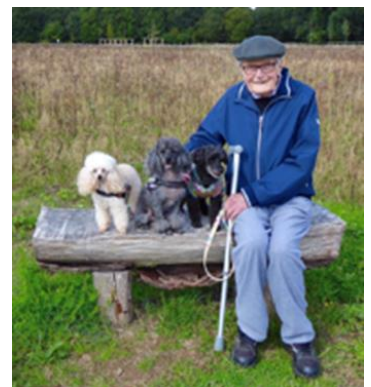
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Memories of our Founder, Don Gwillim

In our last newsletter we shared the news of the death of our founder, Don Gwillim, and asked our readers to share any memories they had of him.

Ann Wills sent us the following:

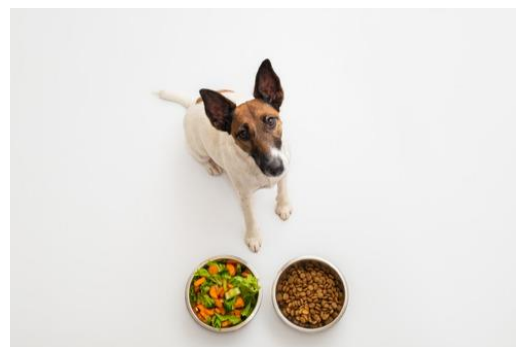
I remember Don Gwillim's kindness. I had arranged to have a Display Panel about animals at "The Christian Resources Exhibition" (CRE) in Sandown, Surrey. However, after I had arranged this, my husband told me he had booked up a surprise holiday abroad for us during the last few days of the exhibition. I asked Don, who was also going to be exhibiting there, if he would mind keeping an eye on my display panel about animals & remove my posters at the end of the exhibition. He readily agreed & I've always been grateful to him for doing that. It was a large, well-attended exhibition & I didn't want to lose the chance of a display there. This was an example of Don's kind nature. I also used to phone Don if 'Premier Christian Radio' was going to have a phone-in discussion about animals, & Don was always happy to phone the radio station & talk about the need to be kind to animals.



The BVA updates view on vegan dog food

Fr. Terry Martin writes:

I remember Tim Dowling, a journalist from The Guardian, calling me and interviewing me about the apparently surprising fact that I feed my dogs a plant-based diet. He was polite, respectful, and interested while, at the same time, showing a natural and understandable degree of scepticism. Was I just another eccentric RC priest, and a dietary freak to boot, or was I onto something?



Dowling also interviewed others, including the estimable Dr Arielle Griffiths, a GP vet who, like me, had seen the light regarding veganism for the sake of the animals, and who was busy researching (and feeding her own dog) a vegan diet for humanity's best friend. Arielle had already launched her important and hugely successful Just Be Kind Dog Food website and would, in time, produce her own excellent vegan food for dogs (by which I swear, as it happens). With Professor Andrew Knight, Arielle has been at the forefront in helping reluctant-at-first vegan humans with dog companions to extend their animal-friendly ethics to their hungry canines.

Rereading the Guardian article (*People say they want me arrested*, Tim Dowling, 11 May 2022), I realise just how far I have come. I would now no more feed my beloved canines animal products, than I would swim the channel.

At last, as many readers will have seen, the British Veterinary Association agree that it is safe and acceptable to feed our dog-companions in this way. Of course, whatever we choose to place in their dinner bowls, is always actually about nutrients, not ingredients. Dr Griffiths and Dr Knight have proven, with many hours of hard work and research that dogs can—and do—thrive when fed in this way. I used to withhold from my vet the information about what I give my dogs to eat, unless I really really really had to tell her. Now my conscience is clear. On their website, the BVA, in a post entitled, *Vets must become the 'trusted voice' on alternative pet food: BVA launches new policy position on diet choices for cats and dogs*, of 24th July 2024, it is conceded that, with the necessary care and consideration—as with any diet, presumably—a fully plant-based diet is appropriate and nutritious for our beloved furry friends.

Andrew Knight, in a statement on his outstanding website (sustainablepetfood.info), astutely and succinctly, says, "It is commendable that the BVA has finally ended its unscientific opposition to (nutritionally-sound) vegan dog diets. It is now up to international veterinary associations to follow suit." A sentiment with which, I'm sure, we can all concur.

I wonder if I should call Tim Dowling back and tell him the news?

A Vegan Diet and ultra-processed foods

We discussed ultra-processed foods (UPFs) in our spring newsletter, but they are still in the news, so we are returning to the subject in this edition. One small study that has received a lot of publicity suggested that the proportion of energy received from UPFs was significantly higher for

vegetarians (37% of total energy intake) and vegans (39%) compared to meat eaters (33%), being driven by a higher consumption of plant-based meat and dairy substitutes. (*J Nutr* 2021;151(1):120-31)

Another recent study by Imperial College, (*Lancet Regional Health - Europe, 2024*) examining the diets of 118,000 people taken from the UK Biobank, was more nuanced. It noted that fresh plant-based foods are known to have important health and environmental benefits, but eating plant-based UPFs was linked with a 7% increase in the risk of cardiovascular diseases compared with eating unprocessed plant-based foods. Replacing the plant-based UPFs with unprocessed plant-based foods reduced the risk of these diseases. However the assessment of the diets of the participants only took place over a few days.

In our last newsletter we shared a link to an article by Emily McGee of the Vegan Society, which is very informative. Here is a relevant extract:

We already know that the classification system is oversimplified, because ‘ultra-processed’ refers to a huge variety of different foods with varying nutritional profiles. This means that simply labelling a food ‘ultra-processed’ is not actually very helpful for classifying whether a food is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ for us. Previous research by the American Association of Cardiology has already linked regular consumption of specific ultra-processed plant-based foods with cardiovascular disease, mainly sugar-sweetened drinks and products based on refined carbohydrates.

The recent Lancet study stated that consuming ultra-processed foods made from plants increased the risk of cardiovascular disease by 5%, and early death by 13%. However, it is important to note that most of the plant-based foods they looked at were packaged breads, pastries, buns, cakes and cookies. On the other hand, research has shown that consuming wholegrain bread and cereal products is associated with better long-term health, and eating plant-based alternatives to meat and dairy is not associated with increased risk of cancer, cardiovascular disease or type 2 diabetes.



Image.: [Julia Sudnitskaya/ Shutterstock](#)

In conclusion, labelling food as ‘ultra-processed’ is not a reliable way of identifying its potential effect on our health. It is more helpful to check the nutritional information on packaged products and choose products that are lower in salt, sugar and saturated fat, and higher in unsaturated fats and fibre when trying to make healthy choices.

Are plant-based meat alternatives bad for my heart?

*Despite news articles suggesting that plant-based meat alternatives are bad for our heart health following the release of *The Lancet* paper, this is a misrepresentation of the evidence. The study did look at meat alternative products, but they only made up 0.5% of the products evaluated in this research. This means there is not enough data in this study to determine health outcomes associated with meat alternatives. Previous research looking specifically into plant-based meat alternatives has suggested that they are better for our cardiovascular health than meat products. This may be because meat alternatives are lower in saturated fat and higher in fibre.*

The SWAP-MEAT study found that swapping meat for plant-based meat alternatives for eight weeks led to improved cholesterol levels. Another study in which people swapped meat for mycoprotein alternatives showed this change led to reduced overall cholesterol levels and higher 'good' cholesterol levels for participants, suggesting a heart healthy effect. Another study looked at intake of ultra-processed foods over 11.2 years and found no increased risk of cardiovascular disease for people who consumed plant-based alternatives to meat and dairy products.

It is true that some plant-based meat alternatives can be high in salt, which is associated with increased blood pressure, so when choosing an alternative aim for products with less than 1.5 g of salt per 100 g.

Is a vegan diet bad for me?

In short, no. It's about having a healthy, balanced diet no matter what your dietary choices are, and a well-planned vegan diet has many health benefits.

You can find the full article here: <https://www.vegansociety.com/news/blog/ultra-processed-foods-and-veganism-what-are-facts-0>

The ethics of meat and dairy alternatives

Ethical Consumer magazine has just published a comprehensive study of the ethics of meat and dairy alternatives, investigating which companies currently own the various brands available to consumers in the UK.

Many meat and dairy-free alternatives were originally produced by small companies which have now been taken over by large corporations or even private equity investors. If you want to avoid your money going to large companies that have interests in the meat industry, it's worth knowing who is behind the products that you are buying. This list is quite revealing:

Vegan and campaigning companies - Three brands are independent vegan companies:

- [Clearspring](#) is a family-run business whose mission is to provide organic foods made to traditional recipes
- [Taifun](#) is owned by a foundation for developing sustainable food systems in Germany
- [Veggies](#) is a worker cooperative in Nottingham that has been campaigning for animal rights since 1984

Several brands (Clive's Pies, VFC, and Meatless Farm) are owned by [Veg Capital](#), whose director is also the co-founder of Veganuary, which promotes and educates about veganism, and which led to [over 2100 new vegan products and menu items being launched globally](#) in January 2024. Veg Capital is a private fund that operates as a non-profit and plans to donate all profits to animal charities.

Other vegan brands include

- [Beyond Meat](#)
- [THIS](#)
- [Vbites](#)

Meat-owned companies - Several brands are owned by companies which primarily sell meat. Two to be most wary of if you are looking for vegan or vegetarian products are [Heck](#) and [Richmond](#), as they have meat products with the same brand name.



- [Richmond](#), along with [Vivera](#), are owned by [JBS](#), the biggest meat processor in the world, and the subject of several reports by Greenpeace detailing [JBS's purchase of Brazilian beef from illegally deforested areas](#).
- [Birds Eye](#) owns the Green Cuisine brand (which is vegan)
- [The Vegetarian Butcher](#) is ultimately owned by [Unilever](#), which has many other brands including some which use pork and chicken.
- [Goodlife](#)'s parent company group [IK Investment Partners](#) includes eight brands which use meat.

Private equity and tax avoidance - There are a number of brands owned by private equity companies.

- [Tofo Co](#) and its Clearspot brand – previously top scorers and Best Buys – have fallen from the top of the table as the ultimate parent of their new owner Comitis Capital is based in a tax haven.
- Brands **Fry's**, **No Meat**, and **Oumph!** are owned by [LiveKindly](#) which is owned by [Blue Horizon](#).
- [Squeaky Bean](#) is owned by [PAI Partners](#) (which also owns brands Clipper, Kallo, Sunny D, Tropicana and many more).
- [Gosh!](#) is owned by another company, which is owned by [Sonae](#), in turn owned by Efanor Investimentos.
- [Goodlife](#) is owned by [IK Investment Partners](#)

All of these owners have subsidiaries in tax havens of a type which could be used for tax avoidance.

The report also draws attention to the source of some of the criticism of meat and dairy alternatives:

Plant-based foods have taken a bit of criticism in recent years, often being associated with actual evidence of the ill-health effects of high levels of wider ultra-processed food (UPF) consumption. It's worth considering where the criticism is coming from, which plant-based foods really are ultra-processed, and how they fit into the context of people's overall diets.

According to a 2023 report by the corporate watchdog Changing Markets Foundation, the social media narrative about plant-based meat and dairy alternatives being "ultra-processed" "Frankenfoods", is driven mostly by a small group of 50 accounts associated with "self-described wellness experts or notable far-right and right-wing media and political figures". The report suggested that "certain people are trying to [undermine scientific consensus on the reduction of meat and dairy consumption necessary to stop climate change](#) and improve public health."

"Criticism of UPF focuses on alternative proteins – when in reality the UPF market is much bigger than just meat substitutes", says Changing Markets.

An October 2024 article on the BBC website titled "[Should we be worried about vegan ultra-processed foods?](#)" used an image of a vegan burger, and referenced some recent research which linked consumption of "ultra-processed foods derived from plants" to a higher risk of diet-related

death. However, it went on to clarify that the UPF foods referred to “included a number of foods considered ‘vegan by default’, such as bread, crisps and condiments”, and that “meat alternatives were the smallest contributor to calories among the participants overall, at 0.2%”.

Given that [UPFs make up 57% of mean calorific intake in the UK](#), the 0.2% that are meat alternatives is a tiny proportion.

There is much more useful information in the article, which can be found here:

[Vegan and Meat Alternative Foods | Ethical Consumer](#)

Plant milks: what's best for your health and the environment?

In a “**WHICH?**” report of this name on the 30th July 2024 Olivia Howes, senior researcher had this to say (this gives a summary of the main points) :

Cow's milk - Cow's milk is a really good source of calcium and protein, including all nine essential amino acids.

According to Allergy UK, around 7% of babies under one have a cows-milk allergy, although most children grow out of it. Lactose intolerance affects around one in 10 older children and adults in the UK and means the digestive system has trouble breaking down lactose. This can cause bloating, diarrhoea and tummy cramps. It's more common in other parts of the world, such as Africa, Asia and South America. It's not the same as an allergy.

Additionally, the production of dairy milk has a significant impact on our environment, and some people may avoid it for these reasons. A 2018 study ([Poore and Nemecek](#)) found that global production of dairy milk had a carbon footprint three times higher than that of any plant milk. On average it used nine times more land and a great deal more water. When you look at the European dairy industry, those figures are considerably lower, but still significant.

Nutritional comparison of cow's milk and plant-based milk alternatives

Plant milks labelled as organic can't be fortified, so if you want to make sure your plant milk is a source of calcium and other vitamins and minerals, you'll need to go for the non-organic versions. Unsweetened versions will be better for your teeth.

Almond milk - Environmentally, it's not always the best choice. Choosing organic may limit the damage to bees caused by pesticides (but will then not be fortified). While almond milk is a low-calorie and low-fat choice, it's not a good nutritional substitute for dairy milk because it's very low in protein. It's a good source of vitamin E, but you can get the same from a handful of almonds, which will also contain a good amount of protein.

Cashew milk -Overall, the sustainability of cashews will depend on the agricultural system and climate they're grown in, but there are more sustainable plant milks available. Like almond milk, cashew milk is not a good nutritional substitute for dairy milk because of its low protein content, although it is a low fat and low calorie choice.

Coconut milk - While coconuts aren't land and water intensive, they can only be grown in tropical environments, which can lead to other environmental issues. It's low in protein, so not a good direct substitute for milk. It's also higher in saturated fat than any other milk alternative.

Hazelnut milk - Likely to be a good environmental option. Like almond milk, hazelnut milk is not a good nutritional substitute for dairy milk because of its low protein content, although it is a low fat and low calorie choice.

Hemp seed milk - While we can't compare it with other non-dairy alternatives as it's not included in the available data, hemp is a low-impact crop with some interesting sustainability credentials. Hemp seed milk contains naturally occurring omega 3 and omega 6, which are essential for health. Vegans and those following a plant-based diet must take care to get enough of these, particularly omega 3, so hemp seed milk could be a useful source.

The only hemp seed milks we could find available were organic, so they're not fortified with calcium (and other vitamins and minerals).

Summary: Not a good direct substitute for milk and because it's not fortified, it's not the best option unless you're getting enough calcium from other sources.

Oat milk - A really good environmental option. Could be a good option if you're trying to lower or maintain healthy cholesterol levels, but bear in mind the low protein content.

Pea milk - A really good sustainable option, especially when the yellow split peas are grown closer to home. Similar nutritionally to soya milk and a protein-rich dairy milk substitute. The brand we looked at is fortified with more calcium than dairy milk.

Rice milk - Not the best environmental choice, because of water use and methane emissions. Children under five shouldn't be given rice milk, as it contains arsenic at levels that are safe for adults but not small children. People are unlikely to be allergic to rice milk.

Not a good dairy milk substitute nutritionally – there is almost no protein. It has higher levels of natural sugar than other alternatives.

Soya milk - On the three main factors considered in the Poore and Nemecek study, soya milk has the lowest overall impact.

The majority of all soya (more than 80%) is grown to feed to livestock. In the UK, dairy herds and beef cattle generally have a higher proportion of grass feed than in some other countries, but large quantities of soya are still used to feed poultry and pigs. The main UK soya milk brands source their soya beans entirely from the USA, Canada or Europe, so are not linked to any deforestation in Brazil. If you find a different brand, perhaps abroad, it's worth doing your research into the origins of the soya beans.

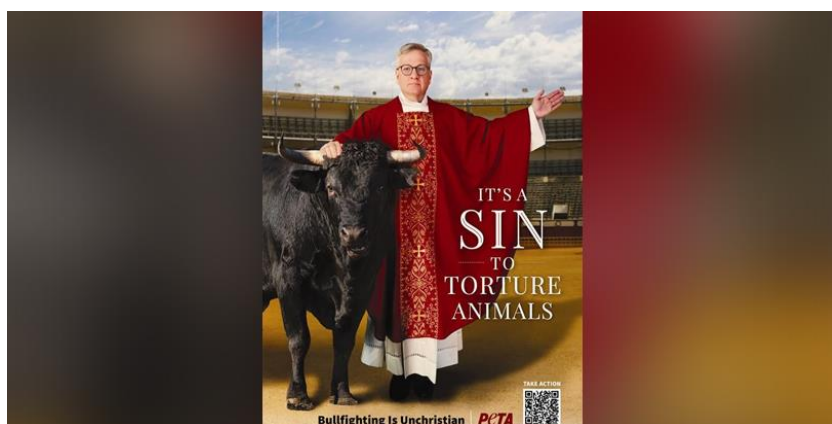
A good option as long as the soya beans have not come from areas with deforestation concerns.

Nutritionally, soya milk has historically been the closest to dairy milk, as soya beans are a complete protein and contain all the essential amino acids. Pea milk is now a similar alternative. It's lower in calories than semi-skimmed milk but contains only very slightly less protein. It's low in saturated fat. Soya is listed in Allergy UK's top 14 allergens. Some children who are allergic to cow's milk may also be allergic to soya.

A good alternative if you're looking for something similar nutritionally to cow's milk.

(The original article contained very informative tables, but these took up too much space to include here.)

Campaign against bullfighting



One of our supporters, Fr Terry Martin, has partnered with PETA in their campaign against bullfighting. He appeared in an ad in the July issue of the Catholic UK magazine *The Tablet*, posing alongside a bull with a caption reading: "It's a sin to torture animals."

Fr Martin has long been outspoken in advocating for the welfare of animals, having sent a joint letter with priests from Canada and France to Pope Francis last year calling on him to condemn the "torture and violent slaughter of innocent bulls".

This latest advertisement forms part of the PETA campaign that also beseeches the Pope to sever the Church's links to the sport.

In an op-ed published in the *Catholic Herald* earlier this year, Fr Martin cited the Holy Father's 2015 encyclical letter *Laudato Si'*, which states that "every act of cruelty toward any creature is contrary to human dignity".

"Paragraph 2418 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church also states: '[I]t is contrary to human dignity to cause animals to suffer or die needlessly,'" Fr Martin continued. "Yet animals are taunted, terrorised, ridiculed, repeatedly stabbed, and eventually killed in bullfights."

Fr Martin said his faith was an encouragement in his endeavours to decry bullfighting, stating that it "allows me to see the entirety of God's creation as a loving, divine gift".

"Given that in Spain, and in some other countries, the Catholic Church is culturally caught up with bullfighting, the lack of logic and absence of Christian compassion strikes me forcibly," he said.

This summary is taken from: [Priest calls on Pope to denounce bullfighting - CathNews](#)

A longer article can be found here: [Priest partners with PETA to condemn bullfighting, calls on Pope Francis to denounce the sport | Catholic News Agency](#)

Animal Sentience

There is an increasing amount of scientific research into animal sentience. Many scientists are studying the cognitive, emotional, and communicative capacities of a range of animals.

The results of this research have led to a number of legal recognitions of the sentience of a range of animals. In 1997, the European Union (EU) gave legal recognition to the sentience of animals and updated and elevated this recognition in the Treaty of Lisbon. Other countries and states as well as the World Organization for Animal Health (WOAH, formerly OIE) have followed it. The UK Parliament passed an Animal Sentience Act in 2022.

Scientists are increasingly acknowledging that sentience and emotion have arisen in a wide range of species. Research now emphasizes that there is an extraordinary variation in how different animal species (such as mammals, birds, fish, or insects) perceive the world and their environment.

Image from CiWF



A recent paper looks at the sentience of the main farmed land and aquatic animals and the implications of this for how such animals are bred and housed. The paper concludes that intensive farming systems deprive animals of opportunities for positive emotions, such as play, exploration, social interaction, and feeding to satiation, and stops them from satisfying naturally motivated behaviours. To truly respect animal sentience, production systems should be designed with the animal's characteristics and needs in mind.

The authors conclude that regenerative, agroecological, or organic farming systems better protect and respect the sentience of animals leading to less suffering and more opportunities for positive experiences.

The full report can be found here: [Animal sentience: The science and its implications, with particular reference to farmed animals - D'Silva - 2024 - Animal Research and One Health - Wiley Online Library](#)

Short items

New "empathy kit" from PETA : A new booklet from PETA encourages people to develop greater empathy with animals, and includes practical suggestions for how to act more empathetically towards them. Well worth a look! [Every-Animal-Is-Someone.pdf \(peta.org.uk\)](#)

Are vegans extremists? Did you know that, until Dr. Jeanette Rowley [The Vegan Society's legal expert on human rights] took action this year, veganism was referenced in the NHS Prevent counter-terrorism training materials as something that identified people at risk of extremism, radicalisation, and terrorism?

John Ryder comments: "It makes me wonder if this was the cause of some of my treatment by some members of the NHS."

Animal biomass: The graphic below is very informative, revealing that the vast majority of mammals on the earth today are domesticated farm animals and the proportion of wild animals is dwindling.



Only **6%** of the combined weight of mammals on Earth is wild

The information is based on recent study by Weizmann Institute of Science. More information can be found here: <https://phys.org/news/2023-02-weight-responsibility-biomass-livestock-dwarfs.html>

Recipe: Beetroot & red onion tarte tatin

Try this vegan tart for a show-stopping centrepiece. The bold red of beetroot against the vibrant green salad also makes it ideal for a meat-free celebration.

Preparation and cooking time - Prep:10 mins, Cook:1 hr and 20 mins. Easy, Serves 4 – 6

Ingredients

- 400g beetroot cut into wedges
- 1 red onion cut into wedges
- 3 tbsp olive oil
- 2 tbsp rice wine vinegar
- 2 tbsp soft brown sugar
- 2 star anise
- flour for rolling
- 500g block puff pastry (we used vegan Jus-Rol)
- 1 orange, zested
- peppery green salad to serve



Image from BBC Good Food website

Method

1. Heat oven to 200C/180C fan/gas 6. In a bowl, toss the beetroot and onion in 2 tbsp of the oil, the vinegar and sugar. Add the star anise and season well. Heat the rest of the oil in a large, ovenproof non-stick frying pan, then nestle in the veg so that they cover the surface of the pan. Cover with foil and cook in the oven for 45 mins.
2. On a well-floured surface, roll the pastry to a thickness of 0.5cm and cut out a circle the same size as your frying pan. Carefully take the pan out of the oven, remove the foil and

wiggle the beets and onion around in the pan to make a compact layer. Put the pastry on top, tucking it in all around the edges, then return the pan to the oven and bake for 35 mins or until the pastry has puffed up and is a deep golden brown.

- Slide a palate knife around the edge of the tart, then put a plate on top of the pastry, serving side down. Flip the pan over to turn the tart out onto the plate – be careful not to burn yourself with the handle. Top with the orange zest and a sprinkle of sea salt, then serve with a peppery salad on the side.

RECIPE TIPS

USE THE PASTRY OFFCUTS

Make vegan ‘cheesy’ straws with any pastry offcuts. Sprinkle mustard powder, nutritional yeast, salt and paprika on the puff pastry strips, twizzle into a corkscrew and bake in a hot oven until crispy and golden brown. Will keep for a week in an airtight container.

TURNING OUT THE TART

If the tart doesn’t turn out, don’t panic. Just leave the pastry on the plate, and use a spoon or spatula to scrape out the beets and onions and arrange them on top.

MAKE IT GLUTEN-FREE

You can easily make this tart gluten-free by using gluten-free flour and gluten-free pastry.

Recipe by [Elena Silcock](#) from BBC Good Food:

<https://www.bbcgoodfood.com/recipes/beetroot-red-onion-tarte-tatin>

And finally.....

Animals at Christmas: A Tale of Two Pictures

The Revd Janey Hiller explores how Advert presents an opportunity to reconsider our relationship to animals and God’s true intentions for all His creatures.



Picture Credit: MM Savage

The idea of animals at Christmastime may conjure up images of cute puppies in pointy red hats and fluffy kittens popped into knitted stockings. Or perhaps even bring to mind some of the more elaborate pet costumes – reindeer, elf or santa – that seem to have become popular in recent years. Those of us who have lived with animals in one way or another, know what it is to feel a special bond to a furry or feathered friend. They become a much-loved part of our families, our lives and our celebrations. So it’s natural to want to include them in all things Christmassy.

Sometimes, though, animal friends can become little extensions of our human selves. The growth of ‘pet influencers’ on social media is a recent phenomenon which portrays animals as having human-like lifestyles – playing dress-up with friends, going on lunch dates or trick-or-treating, lounging on the bed in a onesie – all aided by an industry which produces designer pet-wear and accessories to suit all manner of tastes.

The top 'pet influencer' on Instagram is *jiffpom* – a Pomeranian dog, who has over 30 million followers across various social media channels and who has (presumably with human help?!) posted hundreds of images and videos of his fluffy self in various poses and costumes, spawning a range of merchandise. The fact that *jiffpom* is a living, breathing, sentient being seems to be incidental to the marketable 'product' he (and many like him) have become.

Let's move on to **Picture 2** (a painting at the Franciscan Shepherd's field church in Beit Sahour in Bethlehem district).



The traditional Nativity assembles into one 'scene' all the characters and storylines from the birth of Jesus narratives found in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. Mary, Joseph and the swaddled baby Jesus are surrounded by the angels, shepherds, magi and oh-so-many-animals!

The first thing to notice in this image is that the animals are just that – animals. The humble contrast to the images of 'animals-as-comical-little-people' above, is striking.

The nativity animals participated in the story of Jesus' birth not because they played a part set for them by humans; rather it was their very animal-ness that meant they could be an integral part in the story's unfolding.

There was a relationship between the humans and the animals which involved the animals 'working for' the humans – the donkey, for example, was a beast of burden who brought Mary to Bethlehem. But, as the assembled scene shows, the humans and animals shared a mutuality of purpose in their participation; to be the first gathered worshippers of the God-child, Jesus.

This inclusivity of all flesh around the word-made-flesh is deeply profound. This symbolism is further emphasised by Jesus, the bread of life, having an animal feeding trough as his first resting place. The clean and the unclean come together in a radical redrawing of the boundaries around who can belong to God. Traditional nativities depict an ox and an ass; symbols of the people of Israel and the Gentiles respectively. Their inclusion in the nativity scene alongside each other and in close proximity to the holy family is a symbolic forward echo to the work of Christ in reconciling all creation.

How might we reflect on animals in the light of these two pictures?

In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, animals are afforded great dignity. God's creativity is displayed in abundance through the multitude of animals, birds and sea creatures we share the earth with; all of which God created with joy and called 'good'.

In biblical times, animals were a sign of prosperity and God's blessing and were to be treated with honour. Animals are integral to the covenants God makes (for example the covenant with Noah

was with his family and all the animals). And animals are part of the creation that groans in expectation for the redemptive plan God has for the world.

Let's pause for a moment with a couple of questions for us to ponder over advent:

- What do these two images reveal to you about your relationship with animals?
- What do they tell you about what animals are really 'for' in God's plan for his creation?

My prayer for us all leading into Christmas is that we can be inspired afresh by the animals in the nativity scene. That they will be our 'pet influencers'! I pray that we will continue to reflect the humility of Christ and to nurture our inclusiveness towards all others. And as we busy ourselves with advent and Christmas activities, I pray that we will do so with a renewed and shared sense of purpose; namely that just like in the assembled nativity scene, each one of us is drawn together in the end to worship with joy and wonder the God-made-flesh, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Revd Janey Hiller is an Ordained Minister and Pioneer Activist in the Anglican Diocese of Bristol.

This article, with pictures, is taken from the SARX website: [Animals at Christmas: A Tale of Two Pictures - Sarx](#)