All things bright and beautiful, All creatures great and small . . . It’s a lovely hymn with its vision of a world of beauty and harmony. Though sometimes we look around our world and see so much that is not lovely - the greed, the cruelty, the lack of compassion, the suffering. At these times we may feel that’s it’s a world we are striving for rather than a world we actually live in today. But there is no doubt that there are many people who are striving - who are trying to make this imperfect world a place where all can live in harmony with one another, where there is caring, companionship and joy of life for all – including the animals with whom we share our life on Earth.

And this is not new. If we look back over the centuries and across continents and cultures we see that there have been many – the rich and powerful as well as the humble and powerless - who have cried out against the cruelties inflicted on animals and have tried to influence others to give them a better life.

As far back as the 6th century Pythagoras, for example, was saying: “For as long as man continues to be the ruthless destroyer of lower living beings he will never know health or peace. For as long as men massacre animals they will kill each other. Indeed, he who sews the seeds of murder and pain cannot reap joy and love. The animals share with us the privilege of having a soul.”

Among many other voices calling for compassion, we have Richard of Wyche, Bishop of Chichester who cried out, on seeing cattle being killed for food, “You who are innocent, what have you done worthy of death?” Richard lived from 1197 to 1253.

Among present day clerics, there is in England the Reverend Dr Andrew Linzey, who wrote in his 1988 book “Christianity and the Rights of Animals”: “Since an animal’s natural life is a gift from God, it follows that God’s right is violated when the natural life of his creatures is perverted . . . Confining a debeaked hen in a battery cage is more than a moral crime; it is a living sign of our failure to recognise the blessing of God in creation.”

We also have John Wesley, founder of Methodism (1703-1791) stating: ‘I believe in my heart that faith in Jesus Christ can and will lead us beyond an exclusive concern for the wellbeing of other human beings to the broader concern of the wellbeing of the birds in our backyards, the fish in our rivers and every living creature on the face of the earth.”

Or in America, Chief Seattle who lived from 1786 to 1866: “The deer, the horse, the great eagle, these are our brothers. The rocky crests, the juices in the meadows – all belong to the same family. The white man must treat the beasts of this land as his brothers.”
There has also been scholarly debate over the years as to the nature of our relationship with animals, and specifically whether animals have rights.

Rene Descartes (1596-1650), famous for his statement proving that he himself exists "Cogito Ergo Sum" ("I think, therefore I am.") saw non human animals as little automata - objects without knowledge, thought or feeling. This grave disservice to animals legitimised the use of horrendous experiments on them because if they were incapable of suffering there was clearly no ethical issue involved.

But, thankfully, many did not agree with Descartes and over the years there has been much debate. Do animals have rights? Do they think and feel like humans?

Philosopher David Hume in “A Treatise of Human Nature” (1738) says: No truth appears to me more evident, than that beasts are endowed with thought and reason as well as men. The arguments are in this case so obvious, that they never escape the most stupid and ignorant.

“A bird, that chooses with such care and nicety the place and materials of her nest, and sits upon her eggs for a due time, and in suitable season, with all the precaution that a chemist is capable of in the most delicate projection, furnishes us with a lively instance of this.” (Quotation slightly reduced and modified).

However, the debates continued. But without noticeable improvement for the animals.

It is only since 1975, with the publication of Peter Singer’s book, “Animal Liberation”, that the concerns of many centuries have come together to join with outrage at present day horrors of animal experimentation, factory farming, destruction of animal habitat, the agonies of 1080 poison - the list goes on and on. So that the multiple outrage becomes a cry for action to end the many cruelties to animals worldwide.

The first sentence of the preface to Singer’s book says: “This book is about the tyranny of human over non human animals.” And the basic moral principle Singer sees is equal consideration of interests. This means that yes, in Singer’s view at least, animals do have rights.

What has happened since this time?

A great deal. Worldwide, “Animal Liberation” the book has been the flagship for change. Not as much change as we would like but significant improvements none the less. For example, in Australia as in many other countries we now see:

- A large range of large and small animal rights/welfare organisations pushing for more compassionate action with regard to animals through a range of mechanisms - alerting members of the public to cruelties, giving information to the news media, gaining support from Members of Parliament - and so on
• Government bodies incorporating animal rights/welfare members in decision making processes which make ethical decisions about the use of animals – though the membership is usually heavily weighted in favour of the animal users
• Ethics committees overseeing the use of animals in research - though once again, committees are usually heavily weighted in favour of the experimenters
• A coming together of ethical, religious and environmental issues, with increasing numbers of people becoming vegetarians; in a booklet produced by the Christian Vegetarian Association of America, the benefits of vegetarianism are shown to include - but are wider than - the reduction of cruelty to animals, for example the point is made that a typical meat eater can consume up to 14 times more water and 20 times more energy than a vegetarian.

However, there continue to be many ways in which cruelty can happen, and different organisations focus on different issues though often working together.

The organisation I primarily work with, the World League for the Protection of Animals, is the second oldest animal welfare/rights organisation in Australia after the RSPCA. Our parent organisation was established in Germany in 1898 with the English branch established in 1900. On October 4 1928 the League inaugurated World Day for Animals to coincide with the birthday of St Francis of Assisi. This is still universally celebrated on the first Sunday in October.

Our two major campaigns currently are ending the death and suffering of kangaroos caused by the commercial kangaroo industry and reducing the death and suffering of companion animals.

Additional campaigns include opposition to live export of animals – the supreme example of a process which puts profit before compassion, and the use of 1080 poison – a horrendously cruel means of killing animals and with unknown long-term effects.

We are also in the process of negotiating with a major department store to cease providing Pate de Foie Gras to its customers, given the suffering involved in the force feeding of the animals which results in their livers becoming ten times their normal size.

At an international level, we oppose:
• the use of Premarin in the exploitation of pregnant mares, kept in stalls 24 hours a day for months at a time and milked for their urine to manufacture hormone replacement therapy aids
• Bear Bile Farming where Moon Bears in China are cruelly caged for years for their bile
• The cruel treatment of cats and dogs in many parts of Asia.

Past achievements (at times in conjunction with other organisations) include the banning of the steel jawed trap in NSW, the banning of tail docking of dogs Australia wide, the banning of circuses with animals in some Municipalities, the banning of recreational duck shooting in NSW and the branding of cattle on the face.

But despite the hard work by increasing numbers of people, and despite the achievements, there continue to be many ways in which the animals with whom we
share our lives suffer and die. The introduced animals like the hens and the sows – production machines crammed into cages with fleeting glimpses of the beauty of the outside world on their way to the slaughter house; and our native animals, increasingly driven from their native habitat as what is left of wilderness continues to diminish. Seven and a half million birds disappear every year from habitat loss alone.

And then there is the kangaroo.

An enduring symbol of Australia, he is also sadly a symbol of the cruelty, the lack of compassion, the suffering that reminds us we still have a long way to go before our world is indeed a bright and beautiful place for the animals.

Tonight and every night of the year, four wheel drives will crisscross the fragile soil of rangelands seeking the kill. Tonight and every night, thousands of kangaroos will be shot. Not all will die quickly. Many will be wounded to linger on over days or weeks till death ends their suffering. Joeys will be torn from the pouch and clubbed to death or die of starvation. How have we come to this point? Whether for food, fun or profit, Australia’s wildlife has been in shooters’ sights since before the first fleet. Captain Cook fed his starving crew on kangaroo.

But today’s commercial killing of kangaroos cannot be justified on the grounds of starvation. Or even cost-effectiveness. Unlike sheep and cattle, kangaroos have not been bred for thousands of generations to be food animals. They are slow to grow and have little flesh on their bones. If eating of kangaroo flesh took off in a big way, the kangaroo industry would soon eat itself out of existence.

In reducing the kangaroo to an animal who provides us with its flesh to eat in a restaurant or its skin to put on our floor or turn into soccer boots, we are doing ourselves – as well as the kangaroo - a disservice. For many people, the kangaroo is a magical creature – an animal that can speed over the ground, almost in flight on its gigantic hind legs – an animal that is born as a tiny little grub-like creature, that can make its own way to its mother’s pouch and lie there secure for many months attached to her nipple – an animal unlike any other in the world, an animal unique and wonderful.

If we wish to make money out of these wonderful creatures, we could do so by emphasising their uniqueness, by instilling a sense of wonder at their capacity to survive in this harsh land – and encouraging people from around the world to come to Australia and see them alive and in the wild.

But sadly, the commercial killing – and the non-commercial killing – continues. And we will continue to work as did Richard of Wyche and Pythagoras and Chief Seattle and countless others, to make this a world where animals can live with us in peace and joy.