



THE  
**MERCERS'**  
COMPANY

## **The Lenten Sermon**

**Wednesday 28<sup>th</sup> February 2024**

**Preacher: The Reverend Lucy Winkett, Rector of St James's Piccadilly**

**Master: Mr Peter Lionel Roger Lane**

I've never been to the Chelsea Flower Show. The leading horticulture event in the world has been going for 111 years: in 1913 the first show was held in a single marquee. Today hundreds of thousands of visitors will enjoy the show in May, and since 2020 many more online too. I have more reason this year to take notice of the show, which hasn't featured strongly in my life up to now because the church where I now serve, St James's Piccadilly, is, the RHS believe, the first church to have a garden in the show itself. Designed by Robert Myers and entitled 'Imagine the World to be Different', the garden celebrates not only the garden at St James's – an urban oasis just moments from Piccadilly Circus – but churchyards in general. This follows the General Synod's debate on Sunday commending biodiverse planting to all church land owners – especially those who own land in cities. The importance of green spaces especially in cities was highlighted during the pandemic when the daily walk became a lifeline especially for the majority of people in London who had no access to green space let alone a garden. The garden this year from St James's will include plants that grew up in the ruins of the rectory on Piccadilly which was bombed in October 1940: 42 species of unusual plants grew up, catalogued by Kew Gardens at the time. Pioneer plants as they have become known, they included Rosebay willowherb and Fireweed.

It is one of the two greatest challenges of our time: the relationship between human beings, the most successful species on earth, and the environment which has made us successful. The Christian church has moved a long way in terms of its own teaching, practice, liturgy and spirituality. From setting human beings apart from nature, a traditional interpretation of the command to be stewards in the Book of Genesis, to a rediscovery of human beings interdependence with all that lives.

And this is a serious and proper reflection for the desert season of Lent. It was at the turn of the millennium – in the year 2000 that the then Pope John Paul II, made an unprecedented joint statement with the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew; together they led the vast majority of the 21/2 billion Christians in the world. For the first time, they declared that exploitation and misuse of the environment, of the natural world, was a sin fundamentally against the nature and will of God. Pope Francis of course published his hugely influential encyclical *Laudato Si*, which moved the dial regarding the theology of human beings and our relationship to the earth. I will leave the politics of fossil fuel investment for another day, but the Church of England has taken a lead in disinvesting and the debate is acute and live.

It is important, given the church's national profile, ownership of significant swathes of land, urban and rural, that the spirituality and practice of Christian communities is interrogated. And so our presence at Chelsea Flower Show isn't just a showcase for the large restoration and re-landscaping project at St James's – although of course it is and must be: that was our primary thought, to be able to talk about the Wren Project as we have named it: it's an opportunity to debate and interrogate ourselves, our beliefs and practices and to pray for the earth and her life, knowing that all that gives voice in creation is in constant praise to God who made all that lives and has lived.

The book of Job that we heard from today is a book for Lent: full of bracing reflections on the wilderness experiences of grief, betrayal, poverty, breakdown of relationships and a great shaking fist at the heavens to God; why me. It is strong and reflects the experiences of so many people displaced by war, climate change, conflict, famine.

But it also contains speeches from God that are both lament and inspiration. As tonight's reading:

***'But ask the animals, and they will teach you;  
the birds of the air, and they will tell you;  
ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you;  
and the fish of the sea will declare to you.  
Who among all these does not know  
that the hand of the LORD has done this?  
In his hand is the life of every living thing  
and the breath of every human being.***

One of the reflections most often repeated during the pandemic was that even in the most severe of lockdown rules, when one walk a day was permitted but only alone or with member of your household, connecting with the natural world has been a lifeline for many. If we have been lucky enough to have a garden or some outdoor space nearby, the healing presence of plants, creatures, with their own rhythms of living and ignorance of the fractiousness of pandemic human life, has been a balm and a comfort for a hurting society. Early on, pictures of lockdown city streets being taken over by the wildlife was both cheering and incredibly moving. Penguins took over the streets of Cape Town in South Africa, coyotes in San Francisco, kangaroos hopped down the streets of Adelaide, wild boar took over a suburb of Haifa in Israel and here in London, herds of deer appeared on housing estates and near to where I live, pelicans took over the Mall.

In the face of climate change and the huge challenges posed by the necessity to move to a carbon neutral economy, Job's wisdom from Scripture is timely and a little surprising in that it places humans not in control but asking the questions, being willing to learn from the natural world. ***Ask the animals and they will teach you.***

Even in an urban environment, densely populated city like London, this is an urgent requirement of people of faith. Inspired by the writings of, for example the 17<sup>th</sup> century vicar in Herefordshire called Thomas Traherne. Ahead of his time in his poetry and exuberant celebration of the natural world, his writing lay hidden until uncovered in a bookshop 250 years after he wrote it.

***“You never enjoy the world aright until the sea itself floweth in your veins... till every morning you awake in Heaven: see yourself in your father’s Palace: and look upon the Skies and the Earth and the Air as Celestial joys”*** – Centuries of Meditations

We human beings live in a context of gifts: we are surrounded by beauty and imagination. The world, the creatures, the plants and trees are there – just there living their life.

One vignette from London life might help us here: A man in a high vis jacket is picking up litter in a London park. It’s early in the morning, misty, late summer, and last night’s pizza boxes and cans of lager are clustered under the trees. Not many people are there. But the wildfowl are there gathered in groups by the Serpentine. Among them are the colourful often noisy Egyptian geese. A group of 10 or 12 geese are lying down on the grass under one of the larger London plane trees. And as the high vis man approaches, they don’t move away – and so he starts to talk to them. I wonder what he’s saying – he’s speaking to them in his native Bulgarian and the talk seems friendly enough. He’s smiling at them. His litter picker, the stick he holds, continues to spear bits of paper, plastic wrappings, crisp packets. And as he picks up the litter, he is helping to save their lives. As he speaks to them, perhaps they are saving his. The conversation goes on for some time, until all the plastic is removed from their vicinity and he waves to them goodbye.

This is a really typical scene in a London park early in the morning. Hyde Park was first opened to the public in 1637. And since then, these interactions between people and creatures has happened every day Every hour of every day.

Back in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the encounter between the man and the geese that so encapsulates the relationship between human beings and our fellow creatures that is perhaps needed in the light of the IPCC report and in the light of the invitation of mystics like Thomas Traherne to love the natural world, delight in it, enjoy it, luxuriate in it. The beauty of the Egyptian goose doesn’t seem to be lost on the man. Their feathers black, brown cream, green, orange and white with their distinctive dark brown eye patches contrast with their pink legs and black, brown and red beak. Impressive when they fly, with a wingspan of up to 1.3 metres, they are 2 kg in weight, keeping themselves well fed on the seeds and grass that is plentiful in the park. There is salvation of sorts here: he is, on behalf of urban humans, cleaning the environment in which the ducks are living, removing human detritus, saving them from the city waste with which they are surrounded. And he talks to them in his native language; he is far from home, working a low paid job, I have no idea of his circumstances but am struck by his humour and gentleness as he jokes with the geese.

There is some sort of mutual salvation here yes but also a sort of love here, in this tiny fleeting personal encounter between humans and creatures in the middle of the city.

But fundamentally, we require a revolution to de-centre the human from how we look at the planet, which is God's-eye view of creation. It is our habitual stance to view the planet's ecosystems as a system of "resources" which we can benefit from. We have, since industrialisation especially, viewed the natural minerals, water, animals and plants as resources – albeit sometimes we've worked to make them sustainable – but resources none the less.

The Book of Job, the teaching of Christ, who had nowhere to lay his head and spoke regularly of foxes and birds, the depths of the seas and the mystery of the skies, the inspiration of Thomas Traherne and many since, who write of their love of the natural world, and determine to delight and enjoy all the gifts that God gives. It is from this love that our Lenten discipline will grow; to act responsibly towards our planet home, to repent of the desecration of species and desertification of areas that were once abundant. But to live motivated by love and joy that we join not only with angels and archangels when we pray, but with all that lives and has lived, and all that can give voice in creation. It's an everyday choice: to live like this. I pray that we will make that choice as individuals that will lead to decisions as communities inspired by Scripture we heard tonight.

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ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you;  
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**Amen.**