

Lent 4 2020

Creatures of the Sea and Air Gen 1:20-23/Matt:6-22-30

We have come to the 4th in our series of Lent sermons based around the Archbishop's Lent Book, *Saying Yes to Life*. This week we are considering the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. We are continuing to attempt to look at these biblical passages, from Genesis and this week from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew both theologically and spiritually and also ecologically to think about what our practical responses might be to the climate crisis.

Now I know this week events have overtaken us and for most of us the climate crisis has been pushed out of our minds by the consequences of the corona virus that causes Covid-19. Actually, thinking about these passages is relevant to corona virus in two ways. Firstly whilst it wasn't created by people as such, it certainly came about because of people not caring for the natural world and for animals, in this case probably bats in the way that they should. Our greed and carelessness and our disobedience to the very first commandment of all, to care for the planet and the creatures in it, causes all sorts of problems and Covid-19 is one of them. Secondly we have the reading from Matthew where Jesus tells us to trust Him and not to worry. That seems extremely hard in these difficult and uncertain days. At the same time we need to remember that this will pass, but when it does the climate crisis will still be real and ongoing and if we don't as a race start living very differently and treating the planet with the care it needs to sustain us, then we will unfortunately see more and more disasters of all kinds.

Now I don't want to be a prophet of doom. We do need to think about some difficult things, but there is hope. Like the preacher famously said on Good Friday, it is Good Friday, but Easter is coming. These might be the darkest of days but we have a risen

Lent 4 2020

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Saviour who is working in creation to reconcile all things to Himself. And we can choose to work with Him and not against Him. God created such an amazing abundance of life on this planet and the diversity of birds and fish is breathtaking. From the Bee hummingbird just 5cm long, to the ostrich on the plains of Africa which can grow to be over 9 feet tall and weigh as much as 344lbs! Many birds are mentioned in the Bible and are used as spiritual signs and metaphors, from the image of the Holy Spirit as a Dove to verses about those who trust in the Lord having their strength renewed and soaring on wings like eagles. Ravens fed Elijah and we are told that God numbers the sparrows. The smallest fish is the Schindleria brevipinguis and is just 8mm, whilst the largest known fish is the whale shark, growing to 41 and a half feet long and 21.5 tonnes. But up to 2 thirds of ocean life remains undiscovered. Again fish are seen throughout the Bible, but especially in the New Testament, with stories of Jesus filling nets, feeding thousands and cooking breakfast for His friends. God created abundantly and extravagantly and we have treated His creation with contempt. Birds are facing a crisis, 14% of them face extinction. Overall numbers worldwide are plummeting. There are half as many birds in the UK countryside as there were forty years ago. And as our reading mentions sparrows, the tree sparrow has declined by 90% and the house sparrow by 70% in this country. We still don't know the long term effects that the annihilation of so many insects will have on us and on the planet. Only 7% of marine fish are being harvested at below sustainable levels. 66% are being fished to capacity and 33% are being harvested at unsustainable levels. Overfishing exacerbates poverty in coastal communities and again

Lent 4 2020

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we don't know what effect the killing of the coral reefs is having or indeed what effects the ingestion of plastics and pollutants from eating fish will be. We have to change our ways.

And Jesus says do not worry! Well firstly do not worry does not mean do not act. But also we need to take into consideration the poetic and hyperbolic nature of this teaching. Jesus is making a point. He is not saying that nothing bad will ever happen to us, neither is He saying that none of us should plan for the future. This passage is interestingly set within the context of the right use of money, which is not to be greedy for it, or hoard it but to use it wisely and generously. The least said about hoarding anything the better right now, except that we need to be gracious and forgiving towards those who are acting selfishly. Being angry and saying nasty things, whilst tempting is not a Godly response. They may be very selfish, or maybe very frightened and trying to protect their families. Not our place to judge, although that doesn't mean we can't humbly but strongly confront bad behaviour when we see it.

Back to our passage, with thanks to Douglas Hare I am going to offer three different readings of it.

Firstly an ecological reading which invites us to think about the incredible interdependence of the myriad life forms on earth. We have interfered with God's care for the birds with pesticides and acid rain!

Secondly we can look at a social justice reading of the text, recognising that Jesus was not only talking to His disciples who had become poor in order to follow Him, but also to those who were involuntarily poor, those dependant on uncertain ages and charity. This passage reassures them that God values them more than the

Lent 4 2020

Creatures of the Sea and Air Gen 1:20-23/Matt:6-22-30

birds and lilies. However it is the responsibility of God's people, our responsibility to care for the poor and meet their needs - it is through people, the generosity of others and the promotion of equality for all that the poor can experience God's care for them.

Lastly there is a celebratory reading. We are invited to consider how the lilies of the field reflect the glory of the creator. Nature does not prove the existence of God but for those of us who know the creator, the wonders of His creation are surely to be celebrated!

Being a Christian does not protect us from the troubles of this world, we only have to look at the life of St Paul to know this, he was shipwrecked, beaten and imprisoned but he still trusted in Jesus and rejoiced in the love and power of God. This passage goes on to say, Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well. The reality is that God is greater than our needs and the promise is that He will never leave us. And to those of us who benefit from having more than we need, falls the responsibility to play our part in addressing the needs of the planet and the plight of the poor.

Every week we have been giving you a challenge to change card. We will now put them all on the websites and Facebook pages of both churches. This weeks challenges are of course to Pray (this always comes first), to spend an hour watching for birds and wildlife around where you live, to have an entirely plastic free day, to find out where you can give your plastic to an eco brick project or something similar and of course to continue following the Live Lent challenges on the app or leaflet.