

## Harvest Festival

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on Sunday 4 October 2020

*Readings: Deuteronomy 8 vv 7-18 and Luke 12 vv 16-30*

As the storms of autumn rage over Guernsey, the balmy days of spring are a distant memory. Lockdown was strange and alien in many ways, with the doors of the church locked, no live music or singing, and shops restricting the movements of those few customers who dared to venture out of their homes. But for all the strangeness, there were some compensations, such as the daily walk, which became a ritual and a joy. We walked the lanes of St Andrew, and plucked up the courage to explore the alien lands around us – Castel, Forest, St Martin, St Pierre du Bois and St Saviour. I remember being slightly nervous of meeting people on the cliff paths and developing strategies to distance ourselves from them. On one occasion, the walk was ambitious, and as we left Icart Point to walk home, we had already been out of the house for nearly two hours. However, our fears that politicians or police officers, or even Dr Brink, would be outside the rectory with a stopwatch proved groundless. At least, as far as we know.

Never before had I enjoyed such a regular daily walk. Never before had I enjoyed the unfolding beauty of spring and nature with such intensity. Every week, I saw new flowers blooming, savouring the beauty of each, in silence broken only by the crash of the waves on the rocks below the cliff paths and by the music of the birds.

The psalm at Evening Prayer yesterday was 65, one of my favourites. It's a psalm often sung at harvest festival services, because of verses such as these:

You visit the earth and water it;  
you make it very plenteous.

The river of God is full of water;  
you prepare grain for your people, for so you provide for the earth.

And

May the meadows be clothed with flocks of sheep  
and the valleys stand so thick with corn that they shall laugh and sing.

Until the sudden jolt of the spring of this year, even living amidst the beauty of Guernsey, I had become more detached than I realised from the activity of the created world.

The vision that Moses gives to the people of Israel, on their long journey through the wilderness after their escape from Egypt, which we heard in the reading from Deuteronomy, must have been so deeply attractive to the people:

'For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper. You shall eat your fill and bless the Lord your God for the good land that he has given you.'

Such a description could have been given of so many places in the world across human history, away from the deserts and the icefields. We have learned from science what our

ancestors knew instinctively: that there is a delicate balance. As that delicate balance has been distorted, by our disregard of our responsibility for creation, so the problems around us have become more obvious and worrying. There is evidence beyond quibbling that the icefields in the Arctic and Antarctic are melting, with the threat of yet more disturbance to that delicate balance. The rainforests in the Amazon and Sumatra are being destroyed at a terrifying rate, whether for cattle ranching and cash crops, or for the extraction of oil and minerals, threatening biodiversity and species, large and small. There is wanton destruction because of poaching, illegal logging and more.

Here in Guernsey, we may still be able to 'eat our fill and bless the Lord our God for the good land that he has given us.' But even here we are not immune. We rely on food that comes from other parts of the world. We know that we do not live in isolation. We are vulnerable.

Is it too late to correct the damage humans have done to our planet?

Humans have caused major climate changes to happen already, and we have set in motion more changes still. Even if we changed our destructive habits, global warming would continue to happen for at least several more decades, if not centuries. That's because it takes a while for the planet to respond, and because carbon dioxide – the predominant heat-trapping gas – lingers in the atmosphere for hundreds of years. There is a time lag between what we do and when we are aware of the consequences.

Some scientists think that we may have brought the earth close to a tipping point. But it may not be too late to avoid or limit some of the worst effects of climate change.

Responding to climate change will involve a two-tier approach: first, 'mitigation' – reducing the flow of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere; and second, 'adaptation' – learning to live with, and adapt to, the climate change that has already been set in motion. Recycling and driving more fuel-efficient cars will help, but they will not be enough. Because climate change is a truly global and very complex problem with economic, social, political and moral ramifications, the solution will require both a globally-coordinated response (such as international policies and agreements between countries, a push to cleaner forms of energy, and perhaps even financial incentives to poorer countries to resist destructive behaviour) and local efforts – which is why it is important and encouraging that candidates in the election have identified the environment as one of the priorities for the coming years.<sup>1</sup>

It's up to us what happens next. And, yes, this is a spiritual issue, because we are stewards of the world which God has entrusted to us.

May the meadows be clothed with flocks of sheep  
and the valleys stand so thick with corn that they shall laugh and sing.'

That remains our prayer. But I repeat a passage which I included in this week's newsletter:

'If Jesus is Lord of all the earth, we cannot separate our relationship to Christ from how we act in relation to the earth. For to proclaim the gospel that says 'Jesus is Lord' is to proclaim the gospel that includes the earth, since Christ's Lordship is over all creation. Creation care is thus a gospel issue within the Lordship of Christ.'

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<sup>1</sup> With acknowledgement to <https://climate.nasa.gov/faq/16/is-it-too-late-to-prevent-climate-change/>