

Harvest Festival

A sermon preached at St Andrew's parish church Guernsey by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, on Sunday 6 October 2019

Readings: Philippians 4.4-9 and John 6.25-35

A quarter of mammals and nearly half of birds in the UK assessed are at risk of extinction, according to a report issued last week. The species deemed most important and threatened include hedgehogs, hares and bats, many birds such as the willow tit and the turtle dove, and insects such as the high brown fritillary butterfly. When plants, insects and fungi are added, one in seven of the 8,400 UK species assessed are at risk of being completely lost, with 133 already gone since 1500. The causes of the losses are the intensification of farming, pollution from fertiliser, manure and plastic, the destruction of habitats for houses, the climate crisis and invasive alien species. The State of Nature report, by the [National Biodiversity Network](#), shows no significant improvement since the last one in 2016, which said the UK was 'among the most nature-depleted countries in the world'.¹

I don't know whether the situation in Guernsey is better or worse, but it would be surprising if the decline in the number of species here were not to be a cause of concern.

We have become much more aware recently about the huge damage caused by plastic pollution, with ingestion of plastic fragments by birds and fish, which are passed to us through the food chain.

Over the past year, a Swedish teenager, Greta Thunberg, has walked on to the world stage with an uncompromising message about the danger of climate change. Her campaign took her to the United Nations recently, where she lambasted the older generations for destroying the planet and leaving her generation with a potentially bleak future: 'People are dying, entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction.'

But it's not all bad news. It is not too late. There are inspirational conservation success stories, where people have come together to protect and restore wildlife. Successes include the saving of corncrakes and bitterns, the large blue butterfly and the return of otters to less polluted waters.

To say the least, we have to face a wake-up call that our stewardship of God's creation and our care for the environment has not been a success story.

All of this gives an edge to Harvest Festival. When we see the beauty of the decorations in the church, when we enjoy the glorious scenery in Guernsey, when, as Judy and I did yesterday, people are queueing up to take surplus apples to be added to the great piles of apples which will be turned into cider and apple juice, it is easy to think that all is well with the world. When we see the shelves in our shops groaning with food from all parts of the world, it is easy to be complacent.

But in our hearts, we know that this is not an option. We have heard enough over the years about climate change. We have seen changes in the environment around us, let alone the collapse of glaciers and icebergs, with the threat of rising sea levels.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/oct/03/populations-of-uks-most-important-wildlife-have-plummeted-since-1970>

We give thanks today for the harvest. We thank God for the farmers and growers. We pray for them as they continue to produce the food we need to stay alive. We pray for a growing understanding of how farming can be both profitable and sustainable, without excessive use of chemicals which pollute and damage the environment.

In the collect today, the prayer which sets the theme and the tone of our worship on a particular Sunday, we prayed that we might cherish and respect this planet and its peoples.

In the prayer after Communion, we will take this a stage further. We are reminded that our sharing in the bread and the wine of Communion is a foretaste, a promise, of the feast of heaven which, please God, we will all enjoy one day. The bread is made of the wheat grown in our fields. The wine is made from the grapes growing on the hillsides. These are symbols which Jesus has given to us as signs of the promise of heaven. In Jesus' words, which we heard in the gospel reading, 'My Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.'

Those who heard Jesus says these words were captivated. 'Sir,' they said, 'give us this bread always.' Jesus' response is this: 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.'

This is a gracious gift. But it is one that demands and requires a response, if we are to demonstrate that we have understood the value and significance of that gift. St Paul offers us a pattern of life in his letter to the Philippians, urging us to embrace and love 'whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable'.

Whilst this might at first seem to be simply an encouragement to the highest standards of personal morality and behaviour, it is this and it is more. The prayer after Communion continues with our prayer that God, by his grace, will 'plant within us a reverence for all that [he gives] us and make us generous and wise stewards of all the good things that we enjoy.'

Harvest festival is our response to God's goodness and a reminder of the fragility of human life. Harvest festival is also thanksgiving for what we have and an opportunity to commit ourselves to do what we can, in small but still significant ways, to ensure that there will be many harvests to come – and that the harvests will benefit not just the comfortable people but all God's people.

