

## **Sermon Wednesday 9 September 2020**

### **by Forbes Mutch, Lay Leader of Worship**

#### **Creationtide - The importance of animals**

My wife, Jenny, and I took a short break a couple of weeks ago and went to stay in a house that we own in Portsmouth. We rent it to students, but in August it's empty and we usually go down there for a few days to clean it and check that everything is ship shape - it is in Portsmouth, after all. We have a sort of annual working holiday.

This year, we took our bikes and one day decided to take the bikes on the ferry over to the Isle of Wight. Once we landed at the appropriately named Ryde (we had our bikes), we went for a 50km cycle ride down the east coast to Sandown and Shanklin and then through the middle of the island back to the ferry. It was on the last stretch that we (actually, I) saw an amazing sight.

We were cycling along a quiet valley road. Jenny was ahead of me (on her super-duper racing bike) and I was about 100m behind and then, majestically, leisurely, this enormous bird floated out of the trees on the side of the road at about head height, just a few feet ahead of me and across the road, and it flew down the valley to the side. It was (and is) one of the most awe-inspiring sights in the natural world that I have ever seen.

It was a white-tailed sea eagle.

Sea eagles had been hunted to extinction in the UK by the 1750s. But, in recent years, they have been re-introduced to various locations. There are now 130 birds in Scotland and, last year, six juvenile white-tailed eagles were introduced to secret locations on the Isle of Wight.

And I saw one.

A sea eagle is one of the largest birds in Europe and the biggest bird in the UK. It is about three feet long, with a wingspan of eight feet. Massive! And to see one so close was just incredible. Although their biggest enemy in the past has been man, they are apparently quite tame and, if un-persecuted, will live close to fishing villages. Their staple diet is fish, so that's sensible!

This got me thinking about animals in God's Kingdom.

I work for a human aid charity; we focus on delivering medicines to where they're needed in the world and saving human lives. In doing so, I wonder if, sometimes, when we focus on the tragedies or conflicts or natural disasters, I or we forget that animals also feature and suffer in those situations?

During Lockdown, there was a lot of talk about people reconnecting with nature and noticing the countryside and the birds in the garden. Sure, we care for our pets, we have cats and dogs; we've got a grass snake in our back garden. But do we really appreciate their value and importance as part of God's world?

I'm not in any way suggesting that animal lives should take precedence over human life. But every time there is a famine or a flood or a forest fire or explosion in Beirut, God's creations, His animals, suffer, too.

There is a charity called Animals Lebanon, which is working hard in Beirut at the moment to reunite people with their pets that have been lost in the chaos following the port explosion. And it's bringing a lot of joy to the city when dogs are reunited with their owners.

Animals get a bit of a mention in the Bible, in the Old Testament, more than the New. In Genesis (2. 19-20) we hear that *the Lord God formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky*. So they are an important part of his Kingdom.

As we heard in the Gospel reading, Jesus says, '*Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store seed in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them*'. He created them, he looks after them and we should play our part in acknowledging that.

We should cherish the animals in our lives. As you know, we are celebrating Creationtide, or the season of creation, at church this month. And pausing for a moment to take a glance at the animals on the planet or appreciating the kind of experience I had on the Isle of Wight, can be very humbling and, in a funny sort of way, peaceful.

I saw that sea eagle and, very briefly, thought, 'Yes, that is one magnificent sight; it puts all my worries and stresses into perspective'. If God looks after him, He's going to look after me, too.

Amen

