

Creationtide Sermon – Week Two

Sermon, Sun 13 Sept 2020 at St Andrew's Church

by Rev. Alan Stewart

Creationtide 2/6: Enjoying Creation

Prophets and Vesper Flights (A Creationtide Sermon)

Generations from now, they will tell the story of those few short months of Spring/Summer 2020, when birdsong rang louder than traffic noise.

I admit to a long fascination with the bird kingdom. If granted a superpower, mine, I think, would be flight. And, at different points in my life, as I've considered the birds of the air, I've longed to rise with them, above and away from the complication and stress of terra-firma living.



The natural world is breathtaking in its complexity and beauty. There is, for me, no greater proof of a divine imagination than the glories of this planet we call home; everything so intricately designed; everything so interconnected. And, despite our

unearthing of so many of its secrets, nature's mystery and miracle continue to beguile and amaze. From the marathon march of the penguins to the choreographed 'murmurations' of starlings, we are left spellbound.

This week, I was blown away by a particular chapter in Helen

McDonald's new book 'Vesper Flights', where I might just have discovered my new favourite feathered friend.

Here's what Helen says about the swift: 'Unlike all other birds, they never descend to the ground... Their nests are made from things snatched from the air... They mate and sleep on the wing'. As soon as young swifts 'tip themselves free from the nest hole, they start flying, and they will not stop flying for two or three years, bathing in rain, feeding on airborne insects, winnowing fast and low to scoop fat mouthfuls of water from lakes and rivers.' And each evening, 'they gather higher in the sky... And then, all at once, as if summoned by a call or a bell, they rise higher and higher until they disappear from view. These ascents are called vesper flights, after the Latin *vesper*, for evening'. These flights happen twice daily, at dawn and dusk, and reach heights of up to 8000ft. Recent studies suggest that, 'swifts might be profiling the air... gathering information on air temperature and the speed and direction of the wind... By flying to these heights, swifts can not only see the distant clouds of oncoming frontal systems on the twilit horizon, but use the wind itself to assess the possible future courses of these systems. What they are doing is forecasting the weather... what they are doing is flying so high they can work out exactly where they are, to know what they should do next. They're quietly, perfectly, orientating themselves'.

Just - wow! Don't you think?

In these vesper flights, swifts are like avian prophets. Prophets, we know, are those gifted with the ability to rise above the confusion and distraction of ground level, in order to glimpse something of the bigger picture; to work out where exactly we

are, to forecast something of what is to come, and sometimes, like the swifts, to know instinctively what should be done next.

Prophets are God's messengers, who have been lifted in vesper flight; to see what God sees, to feel what God feels. And that, as you can imagine, can be a lonely and painful and costly and thankless thing.

You see, most prophets, as Jesus himself discovered, are unwelcome because their message is usually calling for radical change, and we all know how much we humans resist that.

Generations from now, I believe we will look back on the ecologists and those desperately campaigning within this environmental emergency, as prophets. We may not always agree with their methods but when all previous methods have failed, what, they ask, is the alternative? Just this week, conservation group World Wildlife Fund have highlighted what they call the 'catastrophic decline' in wildlife. Since 1970 (less than my lifespan) we have lost two thirds of the world's animal population in what many are calling the 6th mass extinction. Sit with that for a moment.

And the warning signs each year come closer and closer to home in heatwave and flood. Across the earth today, unprecedented sea levels, storms, droughts, wildfires, habitat destruction; all threaten to destroy the existence not only of whole ecosystems and whole species and whole cultures, but of the web of life we so desperately depend upon.

I don't know about you, but I personally feel overwhelmed by the scale of this. I find myself looking away because I can't countenance a tragedy of this scale. And, if I'm really honest, I'm unwilling to make the sacrifices necessary to personally do something about it.

And, of course, what we can personally do is limited – I know we all try; we recycle, we reduce plastic, we think twice about using the car; avoid air travel, we sign up to greener energy, use our vote strategically; buy less, waste less, eat less meat. But, clearly, that's not enough. This thing is bigger than any of us. Whole systems need to change.

And the one thing we must never do is to say, 'Well, God is in control', because, actually, God has, for better or probably worse, put us in control. We are trustees, stewards of these precious mysteries. As that Native American proverb reminds us, 'We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children'. This earth, as Melanie said last week in her sermon, is not a gift to do with what we will, but a loan to safeguard and cherish for generations to come.

A question I've been thinking a lot about is, 'How do we pray about this?'. And my sense is that we begin with lament; we grieve all that has been lost; we ask God to break our hearts as his must be.

We pray that God lifts us in vesper flight to where we can begin to feel what he feels, to find within ourselves a deeper reverence and

urgency, and to give us the desire and the courage to become the change necessary. Prayer, first and foremost, is about changing the person praying, and part of the deal of prayer is that we put ourselves at God's disposal by asking, 'How can I become part of the answer to my own prayer?'

For whole systems to change, we start with ourselves, with the small things we *can* do. I've recently taken advantage of a free bicycle service, care of the government, and from now on my pledge, on behalf of my heart-health and the health of the planet, is to saddle up for those journeys I can manage where previously my first thought would be to jump in the car. Prayers appreciated, 'cos that hill is a killer.

Creation is God's revelation. Here, we connect most deeply with our Creator. If you can today, take a walk into nature's cathedral, and ask for the eyes to see both the beauty and the miracle of it all. Ask that God would gift you a new appreciation and reverence for the holiness and the fragility of it all.

One last 'ask', if I may. Can we all, if possible, watch David Attenborough's 'Extinction: The Facts' tonight, 8.00pm on BBC1 or on catch-up. It promises to be sobering but hopeful, because, actually, there is hope, and it begins with you and me.

A generation from now, may we be able to tell the story of what we did today, however small, to safeguard and cherish this Earth we call home, so that our children's children will delight in the same mysteries of marching penguins and prophetic swifts.