

Community Prayers, Churches Together in Felixstowe – Monday, 15 March 2021 at 11 am

First, a few words to **introduce myself** and I'd like to begin with the opening verses of a favourite psalm, the psalm my wife Jane & I chose for our wedding 32 years ago.

I love the picture of the swallows swooping in and out of the temple colonnades and building their nest there, and the sparrows hopping about finding food in the precincts. Nature needs a home and a place to thrive, and that's very much on God's heart. His home is their home.

Jane & I made our home in Suffolk just 3 years ago. We moved here from Milton Keynes. Our reason: to give volunteer time to A Rocha UK (a Christian environmental charity).

We'd offered ourselves as potential retirement volunteers, and were taken up on a different timescale and in a different place from what we'd expected: starting as soon as possible, and to move Sudbury way, to help with the work at Foxearth Meadows Nature Reserve (particularly in a Community Engagement role).

Retiring early to come here means that for now it's a **'tentmaker ministry'**. We both work in a nearby care home to support ourselves (Jane as Care Coordinator for the Community Rehabilitation Unit, and me a part-time Kitchen Assistant). I feel an affinity with a man called Brother Lawrence. He had been variously a footman and soldier and became a lay brother in a 17th century Carmelite monastery. He worked in the kitchen (nothing very fancy or very religious). He learned how to practise the presence of God in the ordinary and know the joy of the Lord wherever He puts us.

Now time to introduce you to **Foxearth Meadows**. It's 12-acre nature reserve by the banks of the River Stour, just west of Long Melford. There's riverbank, water meadows, copses and ponds. The particular priority for the reserve is Odonata (to us layfolk, dragonflies and damselflies).

Here are some you'll meet:

Azure damselfly – hovering around pond edges, with bright blue matchstick bodies.

Banded demoiselle – described to me as a 'flying bow-tie' – sometimes you see clouds of them along the river bank.

Four-spot chaser – looks like 8 spots to me, but I'm told you don't count the pterostigmata (the spots at the ends of the wings – common to all odonata). These are feisty beasts. I've seen them mobbing the biggest beast, which is:

Emperor dragonfly – voracious predators, underwater when they're in their nymph stage, and on the wing as adults. Territorial too, patrolling their pond.

Over 20 species of Odonata to be seen, and plenty else we're home to; e.g.

Grass snakes and lizards and toads

Powerpoint presentation

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<p>Nesting migrants like Chiff chaffs and other warblers – all the way from Africa, maybe.</p>	<p>Slide 8</p>
<p>Otters visit the reserve. I've often seen their spraint and long to actually see one on the reserve!</p>	<p>Slide 9</p>
<p>Here's one on our wish list: Water vole. We hope they'll make it back to our bit of the river.</p>	<p>Slide 10</p>
<p>And finally let me introduce you to our two largest volunteers at present: Mars and Wander, 2 rare breed Dexter cattle, who are part of our conservation plan, increasing biodiversity, giving some plants space to grow, as Mars and Wander graze.</p>	<p>Slide 11</p>
<p>So our vision for Foxearth Meadows is that it's:</p>	<p>Slide 12</p>
<p>A good place for nature (as we do conservation work and hopefully do it well) But also: A good place for people and a place that honours God.</p>	<p>Slide 13</p>
<p>We want it to be:</p> <p>A place of Christian witness – to all people who love nature A place of welcome – to people of all ages, abilities and backgrounds A place of worship – giving glory to God.</p>	<p>Slide 14</p>
<p>We invite people to open air services and prayer walks, as well as welcoming individual churches to use the place for their own worship or prayer activities, or maybe just for a picnic.</p>	<p>Slide 15</p>
<p>Our local Christian youth project enjoyed a nature walk and worship and marshmallows round the fire bowl.</p>	<p>Slide 16</p>
<p>Our local Causeway Fellowship for adults with learning disabilities had a great time.</p>	<p>Slide 17</p>
<p>There have been (and when lockdown ends will be) opportunities to learn more about nature: Bat walks / Dragonfly ID / Dawn Chorus walks / Moth nights.</p>	<p>Slide 18</p>
<p>We've had school visits and theological college placements. We offer family quiz trails and have been able to take up requests for school work experience and summer activity scheme days.</p>	<p>Slide 19</p>
<p>A mainstay of our activities is the regular practical volunteering. It's important for getting the work done, but can also be important as an opportunity for people to find better health, physically or mentally. We've been able to include people with special needs. We're setting up a link with Suffolk Refugee Support and are exploring being a venue for Social Prescribing.</p>	<p>Slide 18</p>
<p>We like to encourage creativity. This is a painting from one of our FoxeARTh days. We've recently produced some beautiful cards using photos taken of birds and dragonflies on the reserve.</p>	<p>Slide 19</p>

Jesus said, “**I have come that you may have life and have it in abundance**”.

We want Foxearth Meadows to be **a place of abundance**, increasing the abundance of people’s lives.

Pause for Questions. Prayer?

What I’d like to go on to do next is say a bit about why I believe care for God’s creation is at the heart of our faith and mission, and very Biblical.

I’d like to look at the sweep of scripture; beginning with a summary.

It’s the summary the expert in the law gave to Jesus (Luke 10:25-29).

It’s a great summary; a great principle, but like a lot of good principles, the big question is, How do you do it?

(If I were to read on in Luke 10, Jesus begins to answer that question with a story – probably the most famous story he told – the Parable of the Good Samaritan).

But one thing at a time ... The first part of the summary is:

“Love the Lord your God with all your **heart**, with all your **soul**, with all your **strength** and with all your **mind**”.

I believe part of the answer (to the question ‘How do we do it’) is to care for God’s creation.

(If we love Him, we will love all that he has made, all that he declared ‘good’. As Genesis says, “He saw that it was good”).

So many of the psalms portray creation worshipping the Creator:

Psalm 148: “Praise him, sun and moon ... Praise him all you shining stars”.

Psalm 104 describes all sorts of land animals, birds and sea creatures, all dependent on their creator. “How many are your works. In wisdom you made them all”.

Psalm 19:1 “The heavens declare the glory of God. The skies proclaim the work of his hands.”

Scripture teaches us here that all creation worships God and it does so by being what it is and doing what it does.

So, part of our worship is to help creation worship. Remember, it isn’t ours:

Psalm 24:1 “The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it”.

It belongs to God. We are its stewards, gardeners, caretakers. That word

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'caretaker' could sound second-best, as in 'caretaker manager'. But I like it. Break it down: care – taker ... people who take care of the world.

Woven through the Bible is a strong link between our relationship with God and with his creation. It's there from the beginning to the end (where we are given a vision of the earth renewed).

In the book of Genesis (chapter 10) God makes a covenant with Noah. It's actually, explicitly a covenant **with every living creature**.

Then comes the covenant God made with Abraham. It's a two-fold promise. God promises Abraham **a people** and **a land**.

So we see a three-way relationship:



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That relationship is then expanded out in the rest of the Old Testament and in the New Testament:



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The triangle needs to be complete – all three sides of it.

If our relationship with the land is broken, it affects our relationship with God
If our relationship with God is broken, it affects our relationship with the land.

Isaiah 24:4 “The earth dries up and withers”.

Why? Because the people have broken their covenant relationship with God. (When our relationship with God becomes sick, the land becomes sick).

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Let's go back to our summary of the law (Luke 10:27) and the second part:
“Love your neighbour as yourself”.

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It's easy to remember; not so easy to do.

What does it mean to 'love your neighbour'?

Surely it means that we work and pray that they find **life in abundance**. God's creation is full of abundance (abundance for us to enjoy, but also to share, and to care for).

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The sad truth is that nature is less abundant now than it used to be, and a huge amount of that change has happened in our lifetime. Nature is in trouble.

- We're talking about a 50% loss of abundance of wild things in the last

50 years.

- A loss of about 10% of species in Britain since 1975.

There's been a catastrophic decline of so many **mammal populations**:
Hedgehogs down by 70% in the last 20 years (a drop from about 30 million to 1 million in my lifetime)

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Water voles – a similar decline and now a rare sight on our rivers and ponds.

Insect life is a part of the biomass and a vital part of the ecosystem. We know that there are fewer insects around. (It's not difficult to know that – our car windscreens aren't spattered as they once were).

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This is partly about chemical use; partly about habitat loss.

97% of species-rich flower meadows have been lost since the 1930s.

So to go back to our summary, "Love your neighbour as yourself": surely there's a strong case to be made that **nature is our neighbour**.

And focusing on our **human neighbours**, we're learning a **big truth**: what we do or don't do to care for nature has a huge effect on our human neighbours, for good or ill.

Take **plastics** – the equivalent to a truckload enters the ocean every minute; and we know that what enters in one place travels to another so the rivers and ocean currents make us neighbours.

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And **climate change**: I'd assert the biggest challenge for our generation to face up to. It makes us neighbours.

The last decade was the warmest on record. There's been a 1°C rise over the last century, mainly in recent years, and we're already seeing the results:

Sea-level rise; more frequent and extreme weather events; greater unpredictability; floods in some places, desertification in others.

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Nature is affected

Alpine vegetation in retreat

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Coral reefs bleach as the water temperature rises and the algae dies, and the reefs go silent

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Bird migrations fall out of synch with vital food sources (like the insect larvae needed to feed the young; or sand eel populations affected by ocean warming)

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As nature is affected, so are people (and it's the poorest who are the most vulnerable and hardest hit). Lloyds of London made a significant loss in 2017, paying out for weather events and forest fires. But the poorest are not insured).

So to think carefully about that question the expert in the law asked, "**Who is my neighbour?**"

- Does it not include the people of nations like **Vanuatu** where sea level rise is making the islands uninhabitable?

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- Does it not include the people of **Bangladesh**, where so much of their country is becoming vulnerable to flooding and land is poisoned by salt water?
- Does it not include the tea farmers of **Kenya**? Tea is dependent on specific and reliable rains, but the rains are no longer reliable.
- Does it not include the people of **the Sahel and the Middle East** where land is becoming unfarmable and uninhabitable and populations are on the move? (Climate change is becoming a driver of migration and conflict).

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Climate change has been driven by the industrial nations but it's the poorest nations that are disproportionately affected. It's vital that we work as neighbours to solve the problem.

And what of **future generations**? Are they not our neighbours too? What kind of world will we leave for our grandchildren?

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We live in the **6th great extinction** – this one is man-made. The extinction rate is about 1000 x the natural baseline. The Holocene is now being replaced by the Anthropocene (a geological era, where changes to the earth are man-made).

We've been entrusted with an abundant world. The issue is: will we pass on an abundant world?!

All this is part of the bigger picture. I find myself asking, "Where do I fit in?" (We can feel pretty small and insignificant).

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My first thought is: We're called to be faithful in what we believe is right.

My second thought is: If we do it (if we 'love the Lord our God ... and love our neighbour') we'll begin to make a difference.

My third thought is: If we work together – as a Christian community; networking with others; working collaboratively – what we do can begin to snowball and have influence.

My fourth thought is: we have hope – in a God who still loves all he has made; and we have prayer – and prayer makes a difference.

Pause? Questions and Prayers?

A bit about **A Rocha UK**.

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It's a small organisation that has a big task. 'A Rocha' means 'the rock'. It's a Portuguese word – because A Rocha began in the 1980's with two English mission partners with Crosslinks – then known as BCMS – starting a project in Portugal on the Algar peninsula.

People visited, learned, were inspired, and took the vision back to their own countries. A Rocha is now in 21 countries.

<p>A Rocha UK began in 2001 with a project in multi-cultural west London to transform an area of wasteland into country park and conservation land.</p>	<p>Slide 23 Slide 24</p>
<p>Jane & I first got involved in 2015 when we had a sabbatical and spent 2 months volunteering in Southall, mainly on a site called Wolf Fields (a derelict allotment site filled with fly-tipping, bottles, cans, hyperdermic needles) now transformed into community gardens and educational conservation areas.</p>	<p>Slide 25</p>
<p>After 2 months there, we had the privilege of visiting A Rocha Kenya, where we saw some amazing projects combining conservation, eco-tourism, agriculture, and bursaries for secondary school children.</p>	<p>Slide 26</p>
<p>Back to A Rocha UK ... It's working on providing some really important resources for churches and individual Christians. Here are 3 initiatives for <u>now</u>:</p> <p>Eco Church – a award scheme to help churches get started and then keep going forward. It's about to celebrate its 5th birthday. Over 3,000 churches are now registered. Over 1,000 awards have been made. It helps churches to look at their care of creation under 5 headings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Their land • Their buildings • Lifestyle • Teaching and worship • Global and community 	<p>Slide 27</p>
<p>As well as Eco Church, there's Eco Diocese, Eco Circuit, Eco Synod.</p>	
<p>Recently launched:</p>	
<p>Climate Sunday COP26 is being hosted this November in Glasgow by the UK government. At COP 25 (Paris 2019) many decisions were deferred. Now we have no time to waste. 'Climate Sunday' is a call to churches to hold a service between now and 5 September 2021 to learn / pray / commit to action / and sign a common call to our government to invest in a green and just recovery.</p>	<p>Slide 28</p>
<p>Churches Count on Nature This is in partnership with 'Caring for God's Acre'. It's a week (5-13 June) aimed to help churches act for wildlife. It's about local citizen science: recording and identifying plants, insects, birds, mammals, reptiles in the churchyard. It's a great opportunity for outreach (children's activities, maybe, and involving the local community). You could: build a bug hotel; do artwork; build feeding stations; have a litter pick.</p>	<p>Slide 29</p>
<p>A Rocha UK would love to help you.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It produces an excellent magazine ('Root & Branch') – free to supporter churches and individuals who commit to £3.00 + pcm. • There are free digital bulletins: Wild Christian for individuals and families; E-news; Eco Church Connect 	<p>Slide 30</p>

- And at Foxearth Meadows we produce our own news and prayer letter. (Feel free to sign up).

And feel free to visit! We'd love you to come in person (as individuals or as a group).

Come and enjoy the place. Maybe to learn a bit, and hopefully be inspired.

(N.B. 10 July 2021 = A churches' demonstration day) ... but the reserve is always open and if we can help in person, we'd love to.

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