

Little Marsh: A Parish Year, by Teresa Morgan, is a collection of reflections on parish life through the Church year. Below are a few extracts (copyright Teresa Morgan 2007).

The book is available from Revd Margreet Armitstead at Littlemore Vicarage, or from teresa.morgan@oriel.ox.ac.uk, price £5 + p&p (cheques made payable to 'Littlemore PCC'). All proceeds go to the work of the parish.

The Nesting Season

A blackbird is sitting on her nest in the winter honeysuckle, right outside my study window. If I dodge about a bit, peering through the leaves, I can just see her from where I sit, hatching a sermon at my desk. She looks back with a bright eye and we are very companionable. From time to time, the male arrives with food and immediately leaves again, gliding low over the garden. I wonder whether he is surprised by the fact that, among the bluebells and alliums, a few pink roses are already in flower.

I have a new next-door neighbour. This is her first house, and she too is nesting: I hear her bustling about at the weekends, rearranging furniture and hammering picture hooks to the walls. We are also companionable, catching sight of each other through the hedge as we make morning tea or chop vegetables for supper. Later in the summer, we are going to tackle the hedge from her side, where it has been allowed to grow wild. Dramatic spires of viburnum spear the sky, and in a couple of weeks will be loaded with creamy flowers.

I imagine the Sermon on the Mount taking place in spring, with Jesus pointing to the busily foraging birds, and the tranquil lilies of the field. After the silence and stillness of Lent and Holy Week, this is a very busy time of year. We are planning fêtes and outings, booking holidays, planting out annuals – literally or metaphorically sowing all the things we hope to reap later in summer.

Reading Luke, I come across the story of Mary and her sister Martha, who told Jesus off for letting Mary sit and listen to him when there was work to be done. Let her sit, Jesus said. You don't always have to be up and doing. Look at the lilies of the field. At this time of year, it is worth being reminded not always to be busy, but sometimes just to be together with our friends and neighbours, listening, and being companionable.

The Shape of the Spirit

The Israelites saw the Spirit as a dove. Grey like the clouds from which God spoke to listening hearts, and gentle as rain falling on winter wheat. It had to be sturdy enough to bear an olive branch across a flood, and light as a blessing descending on a newly-baptized head. It was a bird of sacrifice: common, obedient, meek. A bird that mated for life, making it an image of love.

The Celts, on the watery moors and peaks of Caesar's northern empire, saw it as a goose. They guessed how far they were from the centre of the world, and how strong heart and wings must be to bear it all that way. They were grateful to be visited, and proud that their river banks and marshes were its breeding grounds. It was an inspiring bird, forging spearlike and dauntless through stormy skies. A bird that travelled in flocks, making it an image of community.

I see the Spirit as a swallow: a shrieking, playful, fearless dart of joy, swooping low over streams and meadows, nesting sociably under the eaves of barns and houses. To us it is the essence of an English summer, but if you visit Africa in winter, you find it just as much at home swooping over the savannah and playing around the pyramids. It travels where it chooses, and we can't hold it, only receive it with gratitude and let it go with grace.

I think of the Spirit as a nightingale. Probably you will never see it, but if you listen long enough in darkness, it may sing to you. No other song is half so varied, so ravishing and resonant. It borrows phrases from every other bird and every other sound, weaves them together and gives them more meaning than they knew they held. While the song lasts, you seem to hear the Spirit singing the song of creation. When it falls silent, you hear creation singing in counterpoint.

Holy Cross

This week sees Ascension Day, and the end of the Easter Season. Less widely marked, it is also the feast of the Invention (in the sense of 'finding') of the Cross. In 326, Helena, mother of the Emperor Constantine, visited Jerusalem and there 'discovered' the cross of Christ. Later, the cross was captured by the Persians, and was recovered again in 629 by the Emperor Heraclitus.

Quite how Helena identified the true cross is understandably vague in ancient accounts, and modern ones are sceptical. But it's worth a thought that Jesus' cross could, in theory, just about still have been around - could only recently have been decommissioned, when Constantine abolished crucifixion after 314. The Romans didn't waste wood making a new cross for everyone they crucified. Jesus' cross had probably been used dozens, if not hundreds of times before. It was already soaked with the blood and sweat and other bodily fluids of victims, and Jesus' bodily fluids will have soaked into the wood and mingled with those of the victims that came after him.

It seems to me to symbolize the way Jesus saw his work on earth. To touch; to be in touch; to know by experience. On the cross, he held the traces of all those others as closely to him as in life he had held the sick and outcast, while everyone who hung there after him hung in the imprint of his arms and body, making one body.

At the most basic level, we are physically one, made up of the same particles and chemicals and energy. Every being comes together from the worn-out materials of other beings, miraculously re-engineered and resurrected. Whether we learn it through science, or faith, or love, we belong together. 'This is my body, which is given for you,' says Jesus, telling us that our life hangs on his death because everyone is connected.

Most of the work of religion lies in appreciating it. So many things disconnect us, set us at odds with each other and create evil, that sure symptom of human estrangement. The cross reminds us of the scale of evil we have to overcome, the competing desires and fears; the destruction and injustice; the wounds, physical and psychological. But as Jesus said, 'You have heard it said, that you shall love your neighbour and hate your enemies. But I say, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven, for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous...' (Mt. 5.43-8). This is the text I turn to most often as I grapple with forgiveness, in theory and in practice.

Trinity Sunday

Trinity Sunday, which we celebrate with a festival evensong. We have called on the chapel choir of Oriel College, and they have responded, on the last Sunday of their academic year. The Trinity Sunday readings are all stories of people being called: Isaiah; Samuel; Moses; those who in the Book of Proverbs are seduced by Wisdom into loving God. Some are readier than others, but all respond.

I reflect that we are rarely completely ready. We are beings in transition, creatures of place and time. We're not quite who we were ten years ago, and we don't know where we'll be in ten years' time. This despite the fact that many of us have a strong sense of who we should be, if life would let us. We long to be more complete; fulfilled. It rarely happens. We spend all our lives coming to be, and then we go without ever having quite arrived.

Perhaps that's why so many of us long for an unchanging God, someone to hold on to in this transitory life. But can one call a God who is sometimes Father and sometimes Son, sometimes flesh and sometimes Spirit, unchanging? Is the God who makes half a dozen different covenants with his people in the course of history, wholly unaffected by time and place?

As the choir begins the anthem, it strikes me that our lives are like a piece of music. They start off with a promise of all sorts of things, and gradually they develop, and change mood. They have more than one melody, and sometimes they come to a cadence and then go on again. Eventually they end - but however good the ending is, it never contains or justifies the whole piece; too many things have happened on the way.

I imagine God not as a grand perfect cadence waiting for us at the end of the world, but as all the music there could ever be. Through time, different parts of it are called into being, and harmonize our lives as they go along. And just as the best piece of music isn't the one with the best ending, but the best all through, so the best life is one which goes on developing, becoming part of the slow evolution of eternal life - the joyful, delightful, endlessly creative life of God. The choir take kindly to having God described as music. After the service, they stay for coffee and chat. They're so gifted, people say with pleasure. What a wonderful thing to sing in a college chapel all the time. Richard, our organist, has given us a taste for quality. On my way home, I reflect that the call to new being doesn't need to find us ready, just present; we may never arrive anywhere much, but if God is already with us, it hardly matters. The main thing is to be part of the music.