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Let the waters teem with living creatures and let birds fly (Genesis 1.20–23)

²⁰And God said, 'Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the vault of the sky.' ²¹So God created the great creatures of the sea and every living thing with which the water teems and that moves about in it, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. ²²God blessed them and said, 'Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth.' ²³And there was evening, and there was morning—the fifth day.

A few years ago I attended the A Rocha forum in Portugal. Every three years, leaders from the various national A Rocha organizations around the world get together to meet one another, talk, cry, pray, inspire, encourage, worship, strategize, laugh and eat together.¹ People came from 21 different countries and it was a wonderful time. My strongest memory from the event is of one of the morning Bible teaching sessions: we were deep in the word of God, when suddenly there was a commotion at the back of the room – someone had heard a particular birdsong out the window! The poor Bible teacher had to stop while folks clambered over chairs to lean out, and much excited chatter ensued around whether it was a fairly common Blackcap or a Melodious Warbler, which was possible in Portugal but an extremely rare sight for many people at the forum. Only at an A Rocha meeting could a whole plenary session be brought to a standstill because of a particular bird possibly being outside the window!

I was brought up to love birds and I can identify probably the top fifteen to twenty English ones, but I'm no expert. At A Rocha, though, I was introduced to the strange and wonderful world of bird watching (and to the strange and wonderful people who inhabit that world), and I learnt the excitement of seeing a bird I had never glimpsed before, and of standing still and quiet in a field or wood and learning to distinguish the different calls I was hearing.

In this chapter, at long last, we get to living creatures. We will look in our next and final chapter at land creatures – including the human land creature, of course, and at what it means to be made in the image of God – but here in Chapter Five, we focus on the sea creatures and the birds of Genesis 1.20–23, seeing how they feature in the Bible and what we can learn from them today.

Waters teeming and birds flying

Finally the spaces are ready to be inhabited! There is light, atmosphere and water; land and vegetation; warmth, and a rhythm of day and night and seasons. Now the world can sustain animals, and the first to be created are the creatures to fill the waters and seas, then the birds to fly in the air.

As we saw in the last chapter, so here too the picture is one of fabulous abundance, with seas and skies teeming with life. We would get a glimpse of what this would look like if we have had the privilege of swimming in pristine coral reefs with their incredible multitude of colourful fish, or witnessed footage of mass herring shoals, sometimes numbering tens of millions, covering several square miles. Or we may have been lucky enough to have seen a vast starling murmuration. The largest flock of birds ever caught on camera was in the BBC's *Planet Earth* series where they filmed red-billed quelea swarming over the African Savannah.² On a smaller scale, I remember holidaying as a family one year in a Mongolian tent called a yurt in woodland in the Cotswolds, England. The surrounding seventy acres had been set aside as conservation land, and as we walked through the wildflower meadows, clouds of butterflies flew up around us in numbers I had never experienced before.

We revel in the diversity of what God has created in the seas: the tiny pale-brown *Paedocypris progenetica* fish, found only in the Southeast Asian islands of Borneo, Bintan and Sumatra; the brightly coloured flouncing Siamese fighting fish; the inflatable puffer fish; the bizarre blob fish and the giant oarfish, which can grow to 11 metres long. And we revel too in the diversity of what God has created to fly in the skies: the tiny bee hummingbird; the oddly crested Andean cock of the rock; the stunning keel-billed toucan and peacock; the mighty wandering albatross and the ostrich. To say we are merely touching the tip of the iceberg here is an understatement: there are something like 11,000 bird species and maybe as many as 30,000 fish species, though no one knows for sure. And when it comes to insects we are even less certain, with some estimates at between six to ten million. As British biologist J. B. S. Haldane is reputed to have said: God, if he exists, must have 'an inordinate fondness for beetles'³

As we have seen in previous days, God looks and sees that it is good. One gets a sense that the creation, with its colour, vibrancy and diversity brings incredible pleasure to God. This is no dispassionate God who thinks, 'This is okay; it will do for the time being', but a God who looks at what he has made and views the teeming shoals and swarming flocks with deep satisfaction.

God not only sees that it is good: for the first time in the text God pronounces a blessing on his creatures telling them to be fruitful. The implication is that he has made the beginnings of the myriad of sea and sky creatures that we see today, and with his blessing God sets them off to multiply and fill the spaces he has created for them.

It is good for us to note this because although we are familiar with God's blessing on Adam and Eve to be fruitful and fill the earth, we sometimes miss the fact that that God gives that blessing to all his creatures. It is also worth considering that the phrase, 'living creatures', in verse 20 is the same as that used of 'the adam' in Genesis 2.7, where it says that God breathed the breath of life into his nostrils and 'the man became a living being'. Sometimes people ask if other creatures have souls, and the Hebrew word for 'creatures' and 'being' is the same word: *nepeš*, which elsewhere is translated 'soul' but simply means 'being' or 'life' (eg. Deut. 6.5, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and

with all your *nepeš* and with all your strength', and Ps. 103.1, 'Praise the Lord my *nepeš*, and many other places). So both Genesis 1.20 and 2.7 use the same word yet one is translated 'creatures' and the other 'being'. In fact the KJV is more blatant, translating 1.20 as 'the moving creature that hath life' and 2.7 as 'living soul'. (It is interesting to note too that the literal translation of Prov. 12.10 is 'a righteous [person] has regard for the *nepeš* of his animal', which the NIV renders 'the righteous care for the needs of their animals' – what a bland translation!) The literal translation for both sea animals and human beings is 'living soul' or 'living being' and we must be careful not to ascribe something called a soul to humans but not to other creatures: biblically everything that has the breath of God in it has – or indeed *is* – a soul.

In the verses that we are considering in this chapter we pick up again the contrast with the Babylonian creation story, *Enuma Elish*, and the Genesis author's desire to de-divinize the natural world. In Chapter One, we saw that the Babylonian narrative depicted the creation of the world as coming from the body of the monster sea goddess, and the seas as representing evil and chaos. But here in the Genesis text, along with the sun, moon and stars of Day Four, the great creatures of the sea are created together with everything else. The actual phrase 'God created' is only used three times in the text: right at the start in 1.1; when God creates people in 1.27, and then here in 1.21. Maybe in this way the author emphasizes that, rather than representing the ultimate face of evil, the sea creatures too have been created by God. And, not only are they created, but they also are blessed and are seen as good.

Look at the birds of the air

Although on Day Five the water and sea creatures are created first, we will look at them last and think first about birds. In fact, watching the birds is a very biblical thing to do because Jesus, of course, instructed us to 'look at the birds' (Matt. 6.26). It is an instruction that my A Rocha friends take great delight in – Jesus is telling us all to become birdwatchers (and botanists to study the lilies of the field)!⁴

I am sure we are getting the picture now that, while we tend to focus on people when we read the Bible (understandably so), if we are

prepared to widen our gaze then we see that the wider natural world is also clearly part of the story. Some 30 or so different types of bird are referenced in the Bible (sometimes we're not sure to what exact species the Hebrew refers), and in Jewish tradition they are mentioned even before the very act of creation. The Jewish texts called the Talmud suggest that the Spirit hovered over the waters like a dove.

The dove is one of the best-known birds of the Bible and is almost the first fully referred to there, beaten by just one verse by the raven. Those birds were the two that Noah sent out from the ark to see if the water had receded enough and if there was dry ground. The dove becomes the hero (heroine?) of the story, returning with an olive branch in its beak and therefore the good news that vegetation was appearing. It is interesting to note that the Babylonian story of the flood (called The Epic of Gilgamesh) also has a dove being sent out of the boat by the main character, Utnapishtim. While many of us probably see a white dove in our minds, that is actually a later European variety: biblical doves were turtle doves or rock doves, more similar to today's urban pigeons.

Doves are a central element of the Old Testament sacrificial system and are used in general as burnt offerings, but also as purification after childbirth (Lev. 12, which we see Mary practising in Luke 2.24), and Jesus drives out the temple stallholders who were selling doves, amongst other things (John 2.13–16). Doves were easy to keep in captivity and so could be offered by those who could not afford to sacrifice a larger animal, and they were part of the list of birds regarded as 'clean' and therefore edible in Leviticus 11.14–19.

Alongside the ark narrative, the other significant place a dove appears in the Bible is at the baptism of Jesus, where the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus 'like a dove'. Linked with the opening verse of the Bible, the Holy Spirit has long been symbolized as a dove, especially in art. You may know the piece by the 1960s American pop art artist Andy Warhol, called, 'The Last Supper (Dove)', which juxtaposes Da Vinci's classic painting of the Last Supper with the modern personal-care product brand Dove, whose logo hovers over Jesus' head.

In rabbinic tradition doves represent faithfulness. A symbol of the beloved in the Song of Songs, they were believed always to be faithful

to their partner, as God is faithful to Israel. And, as the dove returned to Noah, so Israel is called to return to God. As the dove 'found no resting for the sole of her foot', so the Jewish people have often found no rest among the nations.⁵

After its role in the flood story, the raven is also referred to elsewhere in the Bible, and is the bird chosen by God to feed Elijah (I Kings 17.2-6). Elijah has just prophesied to king Ahab that, as judgment, there would be no more rain or dew for the next few years, and he has to flee to escape Ahab's anger. He hides in a ravine at the edge of the land of Israel, and there God provides for him: water from a brook and bread and meat brought to him by the ravens. This may sound romantic, but I dread to think what the meat brought by ravens would have been like, and I hope Elijah was able to build a fire to cook it! As with Hagar and water, so through birds we see again God as provider, Jehovah-Jireh – something demonstrated also in Exodus 16 when he provides for his people by sending a big flock of quail in the early evening.

A variety of different birds are used metaphorically in the Old Testament, but one of the best known is the eagle:

Do you not know? Have you not heard?

The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one
can fathom.

He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.
Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall;
but those whose hope is in the Lord will renew their strength.

They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint. (Isa. 40.28-31)

I remember a time when my children were young and the family finances were really tight. We didn't know what was going to happen in the immediate future and I felt very insecure, as if I was being dangled over the rocky face of a canyon and at any point might fall and crash to the bottom. In a time of prayer, I gave my feelings to God, and he expanded the picture to show me that, though I felt like I was being dangled over the canyon, actually my hands were being

held securely in the grip of an eagle who was flying me over the rocks, navigating my path and keeping me safe. It was uncomfortable being held like that and flying with the eagle, and I would much rather have been put safely down on the ground . . . but I knew I was not going to be dropped and that in its grip I was secure.

The Gospel of Thomas (and also the Qur'an) tells a story about Jesus when he was five years old, taking water from a brook, mixing it with the soil and making twelve clay sparrows. He gets told off by his father because he is doing this on the Sabbath and, in response, he claps his hands and the sparrows come to life and fly off. I would love this story to be true but sadly it is almost certainly invented. However, in the gospels, Jesus does affirm his heavenly Father's love for sparrows when he talks to his disciples about not being afraid. Sparrows are everywhere and are cheap – they are sold two for a penny or five for two pennies (Luke seems to have been better at bargaining in the marketplace!) – and yet even with this bird that is so prevalent as to be hardly worth noticing, 'not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father's care', and, 'not one of them is forgotten by God' (Matt. 10.29-31; Luke 12.6-7). Arguing from the lesser to the greater, if this is the case with sparrows whom God loves, then just think how much your heavenly Father loves and cares for you!

You may well know this little ditty by Elizabeth Cheney which expresses the sentiment wonderfully:

Said the robin to the sparrow,
'I should really like to know,
Why these anxious human beings
Rush about and worry so.'
Said the sparrow to the robin,
'Friend I think that it must be,
That they have no Heavenly Father,
Such as cares for you and me.'

One other way Jesus shows his awareness of the birds around him is through his anguished outburst about Jerusalem: 'How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks

under her wings' (Matt. 23.37). He sees the trouble that is brewing for Jerusalem and yet she will not listen and repent. I expect we can picture this in our minds, but sadly today the vast majority of chicks will never know what it feels like to be under their mother's wings, and many of us reading this will never have seen a hen protecting her young in this way: our only experience of hens or eggs is either chicken wrapped in plastic or eggs sitting in a box on the supermarket shelf.

Chickens feature too in the final events leading up to Jesus' death as the cockerel crows three times. Poor Peter realizes that Jesus' words to him have come about: he has run away and denied Jesus at the very time when he should have been standing with him. Linking together birds and fish, the two subjects of this chapter, it is later on, after eating fish together, that Peter experiences Jesus' resurrection grace and forgiveness (John 21.10–19).

There is much in the Bible about learning from the natural world, and there are many things we can absorb from birds. In John Stott's beautiful book, *The Birds Our Teachers: Biblical lessons from a lifelong bird-watcher*, he says humorously that he has developed a new branch of science called 'orni-theology'.⁶ He takes eleven birds of the Bible and looks at what we can learn from each one in lessons about faith, repentance, self-esteem, freedom, work and other things besides. Through it all he reflects Martin Luther's view from his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount in 1521 that God 'is making the birds our school-masters and teachers . . . In other words, we have as many teachers and preachers as there are little birds in the air'.

I have just come indoors from sitting outside to eat my lunch in the back garden. Though we live in an urban area with only a moderately sized garden, we have worked hard to make it a place that is friendly for other creatures to share with us. As a result we have a flock of sparrows and a good number of other birds in and around about. As I've been eating, I've been watching the sparrows as they've chatted together in the bushes, splashed about in the pond and had a dust bath on a dry patch of ground. There is a robin who I think must be feeding a second batch of youngsters, as each time I see him he has food in his mouth; and he has been hopping around near me, watching me with his bright eyes, head on one side. I've been reflecting on the little conversation

between the sparrow and the robin that we read and on how much my heavenly Father cares for me and will provide for me. It is a good thing indeed to let the birds be our teachers.

As we do so, we can join them in praising God. I remember one evening when I was leading the main worship meeting at Spring Harvest (a large Christian event in the UK). There were five thousand of us in the Big Top tent, singing to God, and when I stepped outside briefly, I heard a blackbird in a tree, also singing its heart out. I don't quite want to say that he was singing to God in the same way that we were, but his beautiful song reminded me that the whole creation was also praising God in its various ways (Ps. 148.10). As we saw in our last chapter, the vision of heaven in Revelation 4 includes the four living creatures around the throne, one of whom 'is like a flying eagle'.

Avian emergency

Birds are amazing creatures. There is the colourful budgerigar who is the only bird species so far that has been found to 'catch' yawns – maybe a way of showing empathy or group awareness. There are the chicks of the hoatzin in South America that have a claw on each wing for the first three months of their lives. Their nests are built above water so, if the chicks fall out, they can use their claws to grab onto a branch and haul themselves out of danger and back up the tree (the hoatzin as a species is also known as the 'stink bird' because of their terrible smell!) The Bassian thrush from Australia hunts by directing its farts at piles of leaves which makes the worms move around so the thrush can see where they are. And the woodpecker stores acorns in individual holes bored into the trunks of trees – they have been known to hide up to 50,000 acorns in a single tree, each one in its own hole.⁷ And who of us, once they have seen it, could forget the amazing bowerbird with his elaborate courting display and carefully constructed nest decorated with all sorts of trinkets?

But birds are facing a crisis, with 14 per cent at risk of extinction and overall numbers plummeting worldwide. In the UK there are now half as many in the countryside as there were forty years ago. Returning to the humble sparrow, the UK tree sparrow has declined

by a staggering 95 per cent since 1970 (and the house sparrow by 70 per cent).⁸ Around the world, some of our most familiar birds are in trouble. The yellow-breasted bunting has declined by 90 per cent since 1980; the African grey parrot is now endangered; vulture populations in South Asia declined by around 95 per cent between 1993 and 2000 and are now beginning to disappear across vast areas of Africa, and the European turtle-dove is now classified as 'vulnerable to extinction'.⁹

I'm sure by now it will not surprise you to learn that habitat loss and climate change are two of the key drivers behind the decline in bird numbers. Of these, habitat loss is the bigger issue due to urban development and changes in agricultural practice. The desire for increased efficiency has led to hedgerows being destroyed to create larger fields with ploughing closer to the edges of fields, and damp areas and wetlands being drained to provide more land for production. Changes in crop practices have resulted in the land being in constant use, with autumn sown cereals meaning the land has no time to rest and recover over winter. The move away from mixed farms to ones that specialize in either arable or livestock production has meant there is no longer the diverse habitat that birds need to survive, and the increased use of pesticides and fertilizers has destroyed the insect population the birds feed on and made the ground sterile and poisonous. (The decimation of the vulture in South East Asia, for example, has been largely the result of poisoning from livestock carcasses contaminated with the veterinary drug diclofenac – a painkiller for sick livestock, but lethal to vultures, while licensing of that same drug in some European countries could destroy hard-won conservation efforts.¹⁰) When you add to this the way farm buildings have changed so many no longer provide space for nesting birds and bats, it is easy to see why our bird populations have declined so much – all around the world.¹¹

Changes in farming also mean that the majority of birds in the world are now, in fact, factory chickens: there are three times as many domesticated poultry as wild birds.¹² Standards vary between countries and regions, but the vast majority of the chicken we eat comes from birds that have been kept in terrible conditions.¹³ Bearing in mind God's love for his avian creation, I have come to

the stark conclusion that it is simply unchristian to eat meat from chickens kept in this way.

Returning to wild birds, research in the UK has found that plant, animal and insect life is more abundant on organic than non-organic farms. The former are home to 30 per cent more species, and some endangered farmland species were found only on organic farms. There were 44 per cent more birds in fields outside the breeding season and endangered birds such as the song thrush were significantly more numerous on organic farms. In particular, there were more than twice as many breeding skylarks.¹⁴

One of the best things we can do on a personal level then is support farmers who are growing their crops and rearing their animals without using a lot of pesticides and fertilizers. The simplest way to do that is to buy organic produce where we can, but there are other non-organic schemes that are positive too, such as the LEAF (Linking Environment and Farmers) marque in the UK. These schemes are about 'integrated farm management', which includes the use of traditional techniques along with modern pesticides and aims to minimize environmental impact.¹⁵ Organic produce is often more expensive – and for good reason – so I recommend switching one of your main food items to organic and then when that feels normal, switching something else, and so on.

Saying Yes to Life is being read by people from many different countries, and farms and farming methods vary hugely around the world. But, in the UK at least, farming is changing, and the UK farming community recognizes the need to stop harmful practices. Traditionally farmers have always sought to hand the land on to the next generation in a better state than they inherited it, but they need the support of consumers and policy makers to do this.¹⁶

Another driver behind the crisis is the hunting and trapping of birds, both for pleasure and as a means of protecting the smaller birds they prey on, which are also shot for sport. There is a sobering passage in a book called *The Highland Notebook; Or, Sketches and Anecdotes*, written in 1843, in which the author, Robert Carruthers, describes the measures taken by the manager of the Glengarry estates in Scotland to keep down the 'vermin' which prey on the grouse. The landlord (an

Englishman called Lord Ward) was annoyed that he was losing his game, and so he 'set about a vigorous system of war and extermination against all his vermin intruders', giving prizes to the gamekeepers who were most successful. In three years they successfully destroyed 'four thousand head of vermin' and were pleased to see their stock of game increase as a result. Among the predators were 27 white tailed sea-eagles; 15 golden eagles; 18 osprey; 98 peregrine falcons; 275 kites; five marsh harriers; 63 goshawks; 285 common buzzards; 371 rough-legged buzzards; three honey buzzards; 462 kestrels; six jer falcon toe-feathered hawks; nine ash-coloured hawks; 1421 crows; 475 ravens; 35 horned owls; 71 common fern owls; three golden owls and eight magpies.¹⁷

Despite it being illegal, raptors are still persecuted today around the world. In New Zealand, a farm worker was found to have poisoned 406 wedge-tailed eagles through injecting chemicals into the necks of lambs which were left out to be eaten by the eagles, and in Argentina, 34 Andean Condors were found murdered in a similar manner.¹⁸

One bird of particular concern in the UK is the hen harrier which, having been hunted to extinction in the British Isles in the nineteenth century, had been reintroduced and was making a slow recovery. However, population levels are declining due largely to driven grouse-moor management and the hen harriers being killed in order to protect grouse stocks. Due to this, conservation organizations are calling for shooting estates to be licenced, and for there to be greater powers to investigate suspected wildlife crime, and stiffer sentences and repercussions for the estates and their employees convicted of it. Many conservationists, such as wildlife presenter Chris Packham and ornithologist Mark Avery, go further and call for an outright ban on grouse shooting.

Falling from the skies

Migration is a truly remarkable phenomenon with birds taking epic journeys across continents. Five European rollers that were tagged by A Rocha France crossed the Mediterranean in one night, then took different routes across the Sahara, gathered near Lake Chad to refuel

and moved on to their wintering grounds in Angola and Northern Namibia, 7000 km away from the south of France.¹⁹ That is nothing, however, compared to the Arctic tern which can do a round trip of around 25,000 miles, or the sooty shearwater which can do some 42,000 miles! We had the amazing experience of waking up one autumn Sunday morning to find the local common swift population had chosen the back of our house as a gathering point before setting off on their migration. Hundreds of birds were flying around and clinging to the back wall, cables and window frames (some came through the open windows into our bedrooms), until suddenly . . . woosh . . . they were gone, off on their journey to Africa!

But migration puts birds in terrible danger, and the greatest comes, tragically, from us humans. Horrendous slaughter takes place across Europe, Asia and Africa, as people come out to trap and shoot down the birds, whether for fun, food or pest control. Literally millions of birds are killed by guns, nets, traps or even glue put on trees.²⁰ The 90 per cent decline of the yellow breasted bunting, mentioned earlier, has been in large part due to it being hunted in this way in China.²¹

In all EU countries there is legislation to protect wild birds, but it is not enforced properly and penalties are not enough of a deterrent. Outside of the EU, many countries do not have any legislation at all. If you would like to explore this, the further resources section online has good organizations you can contact. The most useful thing is to find and support an organization in your country. Additionally you may want to consider avoiding travel to countries that are particular hotspots of illegal killing, such as Malta and Cyprus (and write to the tourism department to let them know your reasons).

Thinking back to the vision of heaven in Revelation 4.7 with the 'one like a flying eagle' worshipping at the throne of God, how sad that eagles are one of the bird species being hit particularly hard. Let us give the final word in this section to John Stott. He reflects on Jeremiah who saw the evils of habitat destruction: 'I looked at the earth, and it was formless and empty; and at the heavens, and their light was gone . . . I looked and every bird in the sky had flown away' (4.23-25). It is a warning of a possible return to pre-creation chaos and Stott says in response, 'Let's resolve to do all we can to protect and preserve our

unique God-given environment, and so continue to enjoy its God-given biodiversity, not least its fascinating birds.²²

Every living thing with which the water teems

I have an ocean angel. He sits on my shoulder whenever I am writing or speaking about caring for God's world, and reminds me that the earth is 71 per cent water; that billions of people depend on the seas for their main source of protein, and therefore that when we are thinking about issues of poverty and environment, we must be careful to remember the seas as well as the land.

My ocean angel is called Dr Bob Sluka and he is a marine biologist who heads up A Rocha International's marine programme. Okay, he doesn't actually sit on my shoulder, but he has been very helpful in encouraging me always to include the seas, the ecosystems and species that live in and around them, and the people who depend on them.

In this chapter we are looking at Day Five and the creation of the animals to inhabit the spaces of sea and sky. God makes the water teem with 'living beings' and he creates everything that moves in the sea, blessing it all and telling it to increase and fill the water. Psalm 104 declares,

There is the sea, vast and spacious,
teeming with creatures beyond number –
living things both large and small.
There the ships go to and fro,
and Leviathan, which you formed to frolic there. (Vv. 25–26)

In Chapter Three we met Jocabed Miselis from the Gunadule people off the coast of Panama. They view the world as having been created by two supreme beings, *Baba* (Big Father) and *Nana* (Big Mother), and the created world is said to be a reflection of their singing. Jocabed says, 'When you go to the sea and see the fish swimming and the dolphins jumping, they are dancing because they are rejoicing in *Baba* and *Nana* singing.'²³ As Christians, we affirm there is one creator God.

Let the waters teem with living creatures and let birds fly

Yet can we learn something from the Gunadule people? Readers of this book are from different countries – some of us might live near the sea or ocean and gaze at it nearly every day; for others, seeing it will be rare. Whatever our experience, when we're near the ocean, can we regard the amazing creatures of the seas as rejoicing in their maker, reflecting his glory in their abundance and brilliance?

The seas and fish do not feature in the scriptural story in quite the same way as other elements of the natural world we have looked at in *Saying Yes to Life*. In the Old Testament, the people of God are land-based nomads, pastoralists and then urban and rural agriculturalists. It is other nations around them who are sea-farers, and the Israelites trade with them and enjoy the goods that come from across the water, but they themselves stay in the land that God has given them.

Nonetheless, the sea still plays its part. Most obviously, one of the pivotal events for God's people is the escape out of Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea. As they leave Egypt and its tyranny, a new nation begins to be formed. Some time before this story happens, Moses encounters God in the burning bush. God tells Moses:

I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land (Ex. 3.7–8).

These verses are amongst my favourite in the Bible. They are full of verbs: God sees, hears, is concerned, and comes down to rescue them. The whole story of the Exodus tells of an active God, who takes the initiative in bringing salvation to his people. And at no point is this more true than when the Israelites find themselves with the uncrossable sea in front of them and the chasing Egyptian army fast coming up behind. As Moses stretches out his hands, God sends a mighty wind that divides the sea and drives it back into two walls. The exposed sea bed is turned into dry land and the people cross, leaving the Egyptian army to drown as God sends the sea back into its place. No wonder Moses and the Israelites sing:

By the blast of your nostrils
 the waters piled up.
 The surging waters stood up like a wall;
 the deep waters congealed in the heart of the sea . . .
 Who among the gods
 is like you, Lord?
 Who is like you –
 majestic in holiness,
 awesome in glory,
 working wonders?
 (Ex. 15.8, 11)

The other well-known story that features the sea is at the other end of the Hebrew Scriptures: the story of Jonah. Poor Jonah is rather a hapless character. He does not want to follow God's word to go to Ninevah, so gets on a ship going in the opposite direction and finds himself thrown overboard and rescued by being swallowed by a big fish. When he finally obeys God and arrives in Ninevah, much to his annoyance the people repent and God does not bring the judgment Jonah had been looking forward to watching. We do not even know what happens to Jonah. We are simply left with him sitting in anger under a dead plant with the Lord telling him that, as God, he has every right to shown concern for the city with its more than 120,000 people – 'and also many animals' (Jonah 4.11). For all its oddity as a book of the Bible, this text gives a beautiful insight into God's heart for people (and animals). Though he is a God of judgment, he is also a God of love and mercy, and his desire is always to show compassion.

Beyond these two stories, the sea is closely linked to the temple.²⁴ The temple was regarded as the meeting place of heaven and earth, and represented the two coming together. It was designed to display many features of the natural world, but also contained God's presence in the form of the Ark of the Covenant. Solomon's temple included a sea 'of cast metal, circular in shape, measuring ten cubits from rim to rim and five cubits high' (1 Kings 7.23). It stood on twelve bulls, held about 44,000 litres and must have been very impressive! Ezekiel's

vision reflects the importance of the sea, as water flows from the temple into the Dead Sea, bringing it to life so that it is filled with large numbers of fish – plenty for everyone to catch (Ez. 47.1–12).²⁵

In the New Testament Paul travels a great deal by sea as he goes on his missionary journeys, taking the good news of Jesus throughout Asia Minor and into Europe. Much of Jesus' ministry is around the Sea of Galilee (strictly speaking not actually a sea, of course, but a large lake), and those he speaks to are embedded in a fishing culture and live off the lake's resources. We see him calling Simon Peter to follow him and fish for people, having given him an amazing catch of fish when he and his boat mates had been labouring all night and not caught anything. We also observe Jesus calming the storm and calling Peter out to walk on the water towards him. We read of him miraculously feeding thousands of people with just five loaves and two fish. And, as we noted earlier, it is by the shore, having cooked and eaten a breakfast of fish together, that the resurrected Jesus forgives Peter for his denial of him, and calls him now to take care of Jesus' followers, his 'sheep'.

Apart from the Leviathan, we do not get descriptions of different species of fish (as we did of birds) in the Bible (the only differentiation given is in the lists of clean and unclean food, where there is a division made between those that do and do not have fins and scales, seen in Lev. 11.9–12 and Deut. 14.9–10). Nonetheless, fish take their place alongside the whole creation. They too suffer the consequences of people's sins. It is because of the behaviour of the people of God that 'the land dries up, and all who live in it waste away; the beasts of the field, the birds in the sky and the fish in the sea are swept away' (Hos. 4.3). Yet, those who live in the sea join with the whole community of creation in praising God. The Psalmist commands them: 'Praise the Lord from the earth, you great sea creatures and all ocean depths' (Ps. 148.7, and see also 69.34, 96.11 and 98.7), and in the vision of heaven that we have looked at already, we see not only the four living creatures but 'every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them,' singing 'praise and honour and glory and power' to the one who sits on the throne and to the Lamb (Rev. 5.13).

Theomoana

In our earlier section on birds, John Stott's 'orni-theology' revealed how we can let the birds be our teachers. Former Archbishop of Polynesia, Winston Halapua, who we met in Chapter One, has based his thinking on the notion of *theomoana*. *Moana* is the ancient Polynesian word for ocean and a term that is still used in many parts of Oceania today. Oceanic people have different words 'for the sea surrounding the land, the sea over the reef, the sea over the sand, the sea that drops from the land into deep waters, the sea that flows into mangroves . . . [and] the coastal sea with big waves for surfing and the lagoon'. But, *moana* 'speaks of the mystery of the depths of the sea'.²⁶

Having different names for different aspects of the sea reminds me of the many names for different types of snow used by the Sami people of Finland, Norway and Sweden, and of the different names given to the river Ganges that we read about in Chapter Two. I only have the word 'sea' and 'ocean' in my vocabulary and I am challenged to take more notice of the sea and pay attention to its different forms.

Winston Halapua reflects on the connectivity between *moana* and *formua*, 'land'. There is a strong bond between the people and the land and seas that support them, neither of which is owned but both of which need to be looked after and respected. We may think of the oceans as dividing us into continents, but actually all the oceans are connected, so *moana* 'holds the good news that all creation is interconnected. Each component in the atmosphere, in the ocean, on the land, finds its origin, definition, purpose, completion and continuity in relationship. Life in relationship is the essence of the moana and all its rhythm'.²⁷

Hillsong's 'Oceans (Where Feet May Fail)' is a worship song based on Peter stepping out of the boat, putting all his trust in Jesus. Listen to these words that will be very familiar to many of us and unknown to others:

You call me out upon the waters
The great unknown where feet may fail
And there I find You in the mystery
In oceans deep
My faith will stand

Let the waters teem with living creatures and let birds fly

And I will call upon Your name
And keep my eyes above the waves
When oceans rise my soul will rest in Your embrace
For I am Yours and You are mine

Your grace abounds in deepest waters
Your sovereign hand
Will be my guide
Where feet may fail and fear surrounds me
You've never failed and You won't start now

Spirit lead me where my trust is without borders
Let me walk upon the waters
Wherever You would call me
Take me deeper than my feet could ever wander
And my faith will be made stronger
In the presence of my Saviour.

These words would resonate well with the ancestors of the Oceanic people who made epic voyages across the ocean, and with the early Celtic Christians such as St Brendan as they set out in their coracles (the traditional small Celtic boats) to take the good news of Jesus to other lands, and it resonates well with us too in the journeys of faith we take in our own lives. As Winston Halapua says, 'We too are called to . . . adventures in faith as we move towards the unseen future'.²⁸ Reflecting on this chapter this Lent, could you pause a moment and think back to the journeys of faith you have taken and to any that you feel you are currently on? Thank God that he has kept you safe thus far and ask him to continue taking you out into the deeper waters where you have no choice but to trust in your Saviour.

Revealing the hidden things of God

Most of us, when we look at the seas or the oceans, can hardly begin to imagine what lies beneath, but marine biologists know there is an incredible, diverse world increasingly being discovered. Christian

marine biologists see their work as 'revealing the hidden things of God' – ultimately 'to glorify our Father in heaven.'²⁹

The oceans are the least explored places in the world with wonders that a lot of us will never experience, so let's get a glimpse under the waters through this account from my ocean angel, Bob. He made a dive to research whether a national marine park in the Caribbean was making any difference:

Our job on this day was to swim out through the coral reef and go down over the edge of a very deep trench called the 'Tongue of the Ocean'. We wanted to dive down to 100–110 feet and see what was there and if there were any bigger fish. So we swam out over beautiful coral canyons through crystal clear water and I went off on my own (which you should never do!), hanging out over water which is several thousand feet deep. I'm looking at this wall, with waterproof paper and a pencil and clipboard, and counting fish.

Of course you've got all this deep blue behind you and you're wondering . . . You get that feeling every once in a while, and you can only turn around very slowly because you're like an astronaut as you're neutrally buoyant. Then one time I looked down just below me. I could see a couple of hundred feet down, and I just saw something. I was trying to figure out what it was and I kept an eye on it through the rest of the dive. Then as I looked down one time I noticed that it was getting bigger, and it just kept getting bigger, and then something shot past me! I looked around feeling disorientated and I came face-to-face with this huge fish, as big as me, with big teeth.

It was a barracuda, and they have this unnerving habit of coming right into your face and looking at you. As it breathes it opens its mouth because it is sucking in the sea water and passing it over its gills. I'm looking deep into its big eyes, he's looking at me, and of course I'm a bit afraid. But then I also thought, 'Okay it's a barracuda, it's clear water, this thing is not going to eat me – it's not even going to bite me'.

Then my fear turned into a feeling of awe and wonder. The feeling that captured me was the beauty of this animal, and the

beauty of the situation. As I sat there I thought to myself, 'This is something worthwhile to do. Here I am, I get to be out here studying and protecting these creatures.' Beauty was a huge driver in my desire to protect and study these animals, and beauty has been something that has drawn me to the Lord through the things that he has made.³⁰

Moana in crisis

Our seas and oceans and creatures that exist in them are incredibly precious; they are needed for life itself. The water cycle, as we saw in Chapter Two, sustains life on the land. Our seas are a critical part of the climate system that distributes warmth around the world through large-scale ocean currents, and also of the carbon cycle, as they absorb CO₂ through the phytoplankton that live in their waters. They sustain, as we have seen, incredibly diverse ecosystems and vast numbers of species that together keep the oceans healthy. As human beings, we gain a huge amount from them culturally, and we depend on the seas for a lot of their resources.³¹ In fact over three billion people rely on marine and coastal biodiversity for their livelihoods, which is why the focus of one of the Sustainable Development Goals (no. 14) is: 'Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources.'³²

At present we are not doing this well. The 2019 Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services from the IPBES (Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services) stated that only seven per cent of marine fish stocks are being harvested below the level of what can be sustainably fished. Sixty per cent are at capacity and 33 per cent are being harvested at unsustainable levels.³³ What that means, put simply, is that we are over-fishing: we are taking too many fish out of the seas and in a way that is causing significant damage. Bottom trawling comprises huge nets being weighted (sometimes with metal beams or hydraulic dredges) and dragged across the sea floor. It scoops up everything and simply tosses this back in once the intended catch (predominantly prawns/shrimp and bottom dwelling fish such as cod) has been sorted.

There are examples of local fishermen using homemade bombs to destroy an area of the sea so the dead fish float to the surface, and of using nets with small holes to catch young fish that have not yet grown to maturity and had a chance to reproduce.³⁴

Industrial overfishing exacerbates poverty for coastal communities that depend on the seas. The west African coast has experienced this particularly and there is a constant battle with illegal industrial fishing fleets that exploit the rich fishing grounds, leaving dwindling stocks for local fishermen.³⁵

Sharks and rays and coral reefs are of particular concern. There are over 1,000 species of sharks and rays and, incredibly, new species are being discovered every year.³⁶ But they are being horrendously hunted – predominantly for their fins and meat but also their oils and cartilage – to the extent that one in three shark and ray species is at risk of extinction.³⁷ Sharks are also endangered because, as commercial fishing depletes fish stocks, it reduces the sharks' available food too; sharks also get caught in the vast nets that are put out. An astonishing 100 million are killed every year.³⁸

The dwindling shark and ray population warns us of the problems of overfishing. The state of our coral reefs alerts us, once again, to the impact of climate change. Currently, a third of reef-building coral species is at risk of extinction, but scientists are predicting that coral reefs will disappear completely this century if we do not keep climate change within the limits we have already discussed in previous chapters. This is serious because coral reefs harbour the highest biodiversity of any ecosystem globally and directly support over 500 million people worldwide, mostly in poor countries. They also form – as do mangroves – a protective barrier for the land against storms and tidal surges.

Alongside overfishing and climate change, the other issue that cannot be ignored when it comes to our seas and oceans and all the living things in and around them is pollution – and particularly plastic pollution. Over the last few years we have become frighteningly aware that we are pumping plastic into the seas in terrible quantities and we will all have seen shocking images of vast floating islands of plastic; sea birds feeding their chicks small pieces of plastic; turtles wrapped in plastic fishing nets, and other marine life found dead with plastic bags

and other bits inside them. In the Philippines last year, a dead whale was found to contain 40kg of plastic, including 16 rice sacks and many shopping bags.³⁹ Plastic never goes away, it breaks down into small particles called microplastics which are being found in the stomachs of many different animal species and on beaches the world round. The raw material used to make plastic is also a microplastic called a nurdle or plastic pellet and these are washing up on beaches globally, having absorbed toxins, and contributing to our plastic pollution problem.⁴⁰

The greatest amount of marine plastic pollution comes from the land: from blow-off from coastal communities and industry, and also from rivers carrying inland waste down to the sea. It is shocking to realize that three billion people currently have no safe way of managing their plastic (two billion of them have no waste collection at all), and that plastic piles up in rivers and waterways, causing serious health consequences to the (generally poor) communities who must live among it, before it eventually washes down into the seas and oceans.⁴¹

Blowing the conch horn

Winston Halapua tells of how when something of importance in the Pacific Islands needs to be signaled, a conch horn is blown. In his Letter for Creation to Archbishop Justin Welby, he says:

We need to blow a conch to alert the world of danger not only to ourselves but to the whole planet earth. We need to call for a working together to care for our common home. We need to raise prophetic voices today. We face great crises and need to face them together. We have the opportunity to forward a new movement of caring more deeply for God's creation, of celebrating its wonders and of discovering our common humanity.⁴²

How can we respond to the crisis that is unfolding in our seas and oceans?

One encouraging thing is seeing churches engaging in practical action. The Methodist Church in Fiji has partnered with WWF in working with their communities to observe a period of 'Tabu' during

the Kawakawa (Grouper) spawning period, when the usually solitary living grouper gather in huge numbers at specific times and places in order to find mates. In addition, every Methodist is expected to plant four trees a year, and a number of those are being dug in along the shoreline, helping counteract the deforestation that has taken place there which impacts the coral reef by increasing the amount of sediment and pollution entering the normally clear water the corals need to thrive.

In Coqueiral, one of the poor areas of Recife on the coast of Brazil, the local Baptist church has become a leader in responding to plastic pollution. The River Tejipto runs through the area but has become piled high with waste – in some places a metre thick. When it rains the river rises because of the rubbish blocking it. One particularly bad flood caused hundreds of homes to be destroyed and Coqueiral residents became ill because the river was so polluted with sewage. The church opened its doors, inviting people to sleep on the floor, and this was the start of its work with the community and local authorities to change practices and clean up the river. As Pastor José Marcos da Silva says, 'I used to think it was God's problem and he had to stop the rain. Now I realize we had to get together with the people and take responsibility to act'. The church runs a handicrafts scheme to turn the plastic into products and has undertaken educational work in the community. A march through the city with 14,000 signatures has led the local authority to start taking action too. The river needs constant attention and changing attitudes is slow work, but every piece of plastic taken out of it – or not put in at all – is one less that will harm the people living there and eventually find its way to the ocean.⁴³

The organization Christian Surfers hold beach clean-ups at their UK gatherings and also internationally, and have changed their plastic membership cards to cardboard discs. At Jesus Surf Classic – one of the longest running and biggest surf competitions in Britain – they have stopped selling bottled water and make sure there is only re-usable crockery available. They are also partnering with Surfers Against Sewage to push the government to take stronger action on climate change as they see the detrimental impact this is having on the spaces they love so much.⁴⁴

Tubestation – a Methodist 'Fresh Expressions' church in Cornwall – has got very involved with their nearby beach. A few years ago, big winter storms washed up huge amounts of rubbish so they did a beach clean every Sunday after church for two months. They said to their congregation, 'Our sung worship has finished but if you want to carry on loving the community and worshipping God in a different way, come and join us,' and about thirty people stayed on each week. Joff Phipps, one of their leaders, told me, 'That was the start of a love interest with the oceans going deeper than just from a pleasure perspective'.

They then joined with Surfers Against Sewage and the Polzeath Marine Centre to do beach cleans together. Each year they hold a special week when they focus on looking after our oceans, giving talks about things like climate change and where to buy fish, and they include a day of prayer for creation. This had led to the group becoming more environmentally active, and they now have a wildflower area to attract bees and butterflies, and a vegetable patch with the produce to give away. Joff says, 'We started with sharing the Gospel to the surfing community, but we learnt you can't separate that from caring for the environment. Loving God and our neighbours brings us also to loving our beaches and the whole environment'.

If your church is near the coast, why not get involved in a beach clean up too? One opportunity to do this is with the international beach clean that takes place on the third weekend in September each year (it can be really positive to join with and support what others are already doing). If, having read this chapter you feel that's too long to wait, just get something organized and get out there – preferably in place of a Sunday service so your clean up is an integrated part of your worship life as a church. It is a really good practical thing to do together and can lead to helpful reflections on God's love for his blue world.⁴⁵

If you are not by the coast, your church can still take action by moving away from items of single-use plastic (such as coffee cups and disposable crockery) and swapping to re-usable ones instead. The Church of South India, in its Green Protocols, is encouraging all its churches to become plastic-free by serving food on banana leaves or using steel plates and asking people to wash up after use.

In our churches and as individuals there is action we can take on plastic. The conch horn has been blown and there is no longer any excuse for us to continue life as usual: we must all change our practices. Tearfund has developed a strong focus on plastic because of the recognition that it is harming billions of people as well as the marine environment – Tearfund’s report, ‘No Time to Waste: Tackling the plastic pollution crisis before it’s too late’, showed that one person dies every thirty seconds in the developing world from diseases caused by plastic pollution and other rubbish.⁴⁶ We are working with church communities in Pakistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Brazil, Nigeria and Haiti to help them deal with the waste problems they are facing, and to create livelihoods. Alongside these projects, we are running The Rubbish Campaign, calling on four multinationals – Nestle, Unilever, Coca Cola and Pepsi – to change their practices and reduce plastic pollution in developing countries. All of this will save people’s lives, as well as reduce the amount of plastic entering the oceans. Africa is leading the way on plastic bags – at the time of writing, eleven African countries have banned them or placed taxes on them. But we are nowhere near tackling the problem comprehensively, and you and your church can join Tearfund’s campaign, calling on businesses and governments to change their practices (see the further resources for this chapter at <www.spckpublishing.co.uk/saying-yes-resources>).

Individually, too, there is much we must do, and I hope the need to take action on climate change is a message that is resonating clearly in this book as we travel through Lent together. Hopefully you have already taken some action over these last few weeks, but we need to keep asking ourselves: what more can we do?

We must break our plastic addiction and take every step we can to move away from single-use plastics. In our food shopping, our cleaning and toiletries, nappies and toys, men’s razors and women’s period products, there are many changes we can and must make. I have been trying to reduce my plastic usage for a long time now, but in recent years have stepped up my efforts. It takes thought and a willingness to do things differently when we have allowed ourselves to take much for granted in our societies. But it can also be fun and I have loved experimenting, particularly with my personal care products.⁴⁷ I have

colleagues at Tearfund who are way ahead of me in reducing their plastic usage, and they challenge me never to think I am doing enough and always to look for new things I can try.

Finally, for those of us who eat fish and seafood, it is crucial we do so sustainably. The Monterey Bay Aquarium Seafood Watch programme gives advice on what fish is good or not to eat, as does the Marine Conservation Society – and both have apps you can download to make it easy to check when you’re shopping or about to order in a restaurant.⁴⁸ In the UK, look out for fish and seafood that carry the Marine Stewardship Council’s blue fish label which certifies sustainable fisheries. You are either on the end of a chain of blessing or a chain of cursing – what you buy and how you eat impact those far off for good or ill.

The hummingbird and the fire

Although we have looked separately at birds and sea creatures, the two are closely linked, with what happens on the land impacting the seas, and vice versa. For example, protecting forests for birds reduces the land’s watershed by lessening erosion, which then helps the sea by reducing pollution. So wherever we are and whatever we do, we must remember that the land and the seas interact.

As we draw this chapter to a close, let us return to birds with a story about a hummingbird told by Wangari Maathai, which was recited to her by a Japanese professor:

The story starts with an enormous fire, which breaks out and rages through the forest. All the animals flee to the forest edge to watch – all, that is, except a tiny hummingbird. ‘I will do something about this fire,’ says the tiny bird. So it flies to the nearest stream and dives beneath the surface. Rising into the air, it carries a bead of water in its beak that it releases over the flames. The fire is huge, but over and over the hummingbird flies to the stream, returns with a droplet in its beak, and lets it fall onto the flames. Each time, the bird believes that this one drop might make the difference.

The other animals – some with large trunks and large mouths like the elephant, giraffe, lion and leopard – laugh at the diminutive creature. ‘What do you think you’re doing?’ they jeer. ‘You’re only a hummingbird. You can see how big the forest fire is. Do you think you’re going to do any good at all?’. Without wasting any time and tired of their discouraging words and inaction, the humming bird turns to the other animals as it prepares to fly back to the river, and says, ‘Well I’m doing the best I can!’⁴⁹

We have faced some big issues in this chapter and as we look at how to respond, we could feel like that hummingbird: small, insignificant, vulnerable and not wanting to be laughed at. But let us do everything we can to take action on the issues we have considered and draw courage from these words of Wangari Maathai, a woman who herself was prepared to stand up and bring about change:

Hummingbirds though we may feel ourselves to be, we nevertheless have to take our small beaks and carry that bead of water (that droplet of change) to where it is needed, and do it over and over again, notwithstanding the . . . odds . . . or indifference from those more powerful than us. Alternatively, we may encourage others to step forward and join us. We will never know until we leave a fixed state and give ourselves the energy to move into action. In the end, all we are called to do is the best we can.⁵⁰

For discussion

- 1 What experiences have you had of seeing ‘teeming’ in the natural world? Reflect on those and take time – on your own or in a group – to appreciate those experiences and thank God for them.
- 2 In this chapter, we ponder the suggestion that it is unchristian to eat meat from chickens that have been reared in cramped and intensive conditions. It is likely this has implications for the majority of us reading this book. How do you feel about this? Do

you agree or not, and why?

- 3 Watch this chapter’s interview, featuring Professor Meric Srokosz from the National Oceanography Centre, and use his expertise on the oceans to stimulate your own thoughts and discussions. You can watch the video at <www.spckpublishing.co.uk/saying-yes-resources>.
- 4 Do you have a favourite sea/ocean place to be, or favourite memory? If you do, sit still and allow yourself to go back to that place or memory and, as you do so, ask God what he might want to say to you.
- 5 Make a mental note of the different ways in which you use plastic. Maybe look around you or around your house and notice how much there is. What plastic things will you decide now to abandon or find an alternative for?
- 6 How could your church get involved with the topics this chapter considers?

Prayer from young person in Vanuatu⁵¹

O Jesus,
be the canoe that holds me in the sea of life,
be the steer that keeps me straight,
be the outrigger that supports me in time of great temptation.
Let your Spirit be my sail that carries me through each day,
as I journey steadfastly on the long voyage of life.
Amen.