

Ipswich Unitarians

SEASON OF BIRDSONG OR SILENT SPRING?

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Ipswich and Framlingham Unitarian Meeting Houses, 2nd March 2010

We are now up to the fifth Sunday in Lent. As Lent advances towards the great festival of Easter, we also sense the advance of spring: the succession of flowers from snowdrops and aconites to primroses, crocuses, violets and daffodils; the succession of birdsong as “new” species join the dawn chorus with each passing week. The first cuckoo is easily awaited and we look forward to the return of the nightingale to our Suffolk woods. And maybe we anticipate the return of a bird immortalised in those beautiful words from the Song of Songs:

*For see, the winter is past!
The rains are over and gone;
the flowers appear in the countryside;
the season of birdsong is come,
and the turtle-dove's cooing is heard in our land.*

(2: 11-12)

It is no accident that Lent's progress should coincide with that of spring. The word “Lent” actually means “spring” in Anglo-Saxon. Throughout Lent, then, we are not only observing the forty days that Jesus spent in the wilderness, we are also observing the most remarkable season of the year – in which the seemingly dead earth first stirs and then erupts with life, raising our winter-weary spirits along with it.

Lent leads up to the Christian festival of Easter, the celebration of Christ's resurrection after his death and entombment in the cold earth. And it also leads up to the time of the old Anglo-Saxon festival of Oestre, goddess of fertility and rebirth, of nature's resurrection after its entombment in the cold earth. So, although we think of Lent and Easter as Christian events, the names of both also connect us with the natural world and with our pagan past.

The New Testament clearly associates the Christian festival of Easter with springtime and describes the dramatic events as taking place at Passover, the great Jewish spring festival, but it says nothing about when in the year Jesus spent his forty days in the wilderness. It is only because the Christian Church fixed the Lenten fast in the forty days before Easter that Lent became the winter-into-spring event that it now is. It must be said, though, that the coincidence is a happy and, no doubt, quite deliberate one. The watchful, sombre early days of Lent match the early spring as winter's grip is slowly loosened, just as the joy of Easter matches that point when it can truly be said that, “...the winter is past!...the flowers appear in the country side”, and, “the season of birdsong is come.”

Although every season has its particular beauty and charm, none so sweeps us up in its affirmation of life as spring. Dull would they be of soul who do not feel it rising within them!

If Jesus did spend his forty-day fast in the Judaeen wilderness in springtime, then he too would have felt the rising power of spring. That wilderness, although remote and apparently barren, is actually full of life – and never more so than in spring. After the winter rains, but before the scorching heat of summer, that wilderness “blossoms as the rose”. Jesus would have seen around him some beautiful wildflowers, and both heard and seen many wonderful birds. And we know that he noticed them! “Look at the birds in the sky...” he urged his hearers, as he urges us still, to see in them the evidence of God's love and generosity: “...they do not sow and reap and store in barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them.” (Matthew 6: 26)

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If Jesus was in the wilderness in spring he would have looked up and seen the great flocks of migrating storks on their way north from Africa. He may well have seen around him in the evenings vast numbers of eagles, resting on their journey north following the spring. He would have seen some of the birds that are familiar to us, but he would also have seen others that are specialists of the desert and the Judaeen wilderness – such as the Dead Sea Sparrow, the partridge-like Chukar, the Desert Finch, and the sombrely-clad Mourning Wheatear. And he may well have heard the gentle purring of the Turtle-dove on its way to woodlands, gardens and orchards in gentler lands such as ours.

If we are lucky, we too will hear the Turtle-doves in our countryside this spring and summer, but we are much less likely to than was once the case – habitat-destruction and hunting along their migration route have taken a terrible toll. And so too has pollution of the environment that still, in the 21st century, threatens us with the prospect of a silent spring.

Those last two words – which send a chill down the spine of anyone who rejoices in the Divine Creation – form the title of one of the 20th century's most important books. Rachel Carson's 'Silent Spring', first published in 1962, awakened the world to the disastrous consequences of environmental pollution, especially in agriculture, horticulture and forestry. Each year vast amounts of chemical pesticides and herbicides were being sprayed indiscriminately over the countryside – and even over towns – in a devastating and self-defeating campaign against all manner of insects and plants that, rightly or wrongly, were seen as "pests" and "weeds".

The irony was that the target species proved remarkably resistant, rapidly adapting to cope with the chemical onslaught, but many other species were fatally caught in the crossfire, unable to adapt as quickly as the more resourceful "pests". Rachel Carson, appalled at reports of collapsing populations of birds, fish and other harmless and beneficial living things, was able to trace the cause to the widespread use of poisonous chemicals. These were not only destructive in themselves, but also, when mixing together in the environment, formed potent cocktails – with all manner of unforeseen consequences, not only for wildlife and domestic animals, but for human health too.

Rachel Carson came under fierce attack from powerful vested interests in industry and sections of the scientific and political establishments. When they were unable to counter her meticulously researched scientific arguments they resorted to character assassination, intimidation and attempted ridicule, dismissing her arguments on the grounds that they came from a woman! But she stuck to her guns, calmly making her case before the public and before Senate committees. Her courage and determination were all the more remarkable for the fact that through much of this time she was dying of cancer. She died on 14th April 1964 aged only 57, just two years after the publication of 'Silent Spring'.

Although her religious background was Presbyterian, she had requested a low-key memorial service at All Souls' Unitarian Church in Washington D.C. - to be conducted by the minister there, and her friend, the Rev. Duncan Howlett. But in an echo of what had happened to one of her scientific heroes, Charles Darwin, what Rachel Carson got was virtually a state funeral in Washington's National Cathedral, with distinguished politicians, scientists and conservationists among the pallbearers!

The fact was that, intellectually, scientifically and morally, Carson had carried the day against the deniers of her science, the vested interests who feared the commercial consequences of her

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findings, regardless of their truth and their importance. Rachel Carson was a true prophet in the sense of being one who speaks out, who witnesses to the truth they have found without fear or favour. The commercial interests who had spent millions of dollars on trying to discredit 'Silent Spring' and its author, had only succeeded in boosting its already impressive sales. Among the readers was President John F. Kennedy, who ordered an investigation into the effects of chemical pesticides as a result. Its findings bore out Carson's.

'Silent Spring' was immensely influential. Carson was not only a good scientist she was also a good populariser of science, a fine writer with a deep spiritual attachment to the natural world. Her combination of these elements all contributed to the book's success. And it did change things. Many poisonous chemical pesticides were banned or more closely controlled because of it. Her advocacy of alternative ways of controlling pests and diseases bore fruit – quite literally! And she changed for ever the attitudes of millions, increasing awareness of the fragility of natural environments and showing that the greatest victims of our poisoning and degrading of the planet would ultimately be ourselves.

Rachel Carson's warnings about the long-term effects of chemical pollution on human health were radical, timely and true. And they found an echo in that other voice of the 1960s, the young prophet-poet, Bob Dylan, who sang of a people and a land, "Where the pellets of poison are flooding their waters."*

'Silent Spring' opens with what Rachel Carson calls a "fable", about an American town where all the chickens of our abuse of our environment come home to roost in one place at one time. The town is fictional, but all things she describes in the "fable" had actually happened in one place or another in incidents that she had studied. The rest of the book consists of a well-argued, well-documented scientific case. 'Silent Spring' had direct beneficial effects, and not only in America. It led to important changes in the controls on a number of poisonous agricultural chemicals in many but, sadly, not all countries. The book wasn't able to solve all our problems, and there is still too much ill-considered and irresponsible – even reckless – use of chemicals, not only in agriculture and horticulture, but in our own gardens. A poison doesn't have to kill birds directly to bring about a silencing of spring. It can have serious effects indirectly by killing the insects and plants they need for food.

We still repeat the mistakes of the past and we stumble into new ones, but nevertheless Rachel Carson's 'Silent Spring' made us look at the world in a new way. She made us more aware than we had ever been about the impact we are having on the natural environment – and not only with poisonous chemicals. But still those powerful vested interests in industry and in governments – not to mention our own reluctance to face facts – try to silence those they perceive as a threat to themselves. They use intimidation, dirty tricks and propaganda against their critics just as they used them against Rachel Carson in the early 1960s.

The fact that we can still enjoy the "season of birdsong" owes much to her, but all is not well nevertheless. We may still face the possibility of a silent spring. We still deprive our fellow living creatures, not least those "birds of the air" about which Jesus spoke, of food to eat, places to live, a clean environment, and a stable climate. And if we are depriving our fellow creatures of these things then we will soon deprive ourselves of them too.

Rachel Carson loved the wild places. She found there a profound spiritual resource, drawing strength from the myriad creatures of land, sea and sky. But although she loved the natural wilderness, she was, for a time, a lone voice crying in the scientific wilderness – until she was

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proved right and turned the tables on her critics and her enemies. But we cannot rest on her laurels!

Rachel Carson was a prophetic voice and, like all true prophets, like Jesus himself, she made enemies among those who valued their wealth, their power, their reputations and their wilful ignorance above the search for truth and the welfare of future generations on this living earth.

All of us, with due humility and openness of mind, must witness to the truth we find revealed by informed insight and study - and take as our examples the voices that cried in the wilderness, calling humanity to repent of our folly and to learn the wisdom that can save us.

Note: 'Silent Spring' was first published in the United States on 27th September 1962 and in the United Kingdom the following year. It is currently available in Penguin, with an 'Afterword' written in 1998 by Linda Lear. Linda Lear is the author of the definitive biography, 'Rachel Carson, Witness for Nature', first published in 1997 and with a new Mariner Books edition in 2009.

**'Hard Rain's Gonna Fall', from, 'The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan' (CBS, 1963)*