

Suffolk County Harvest 2017

The Very Revd Dr Frances Ward

I must go down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky,
And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by;
I must go down to the seas again, to the vagrant gypsy life,
To the gull's way and the whale's way, where the wind's like a
whetted knife.

I'm going to miss the Suffolk coastline as I head north. The grey mist on the sea's face; the grey dawn breaking. The shingle; the beach huts; the fish for sale. The place of the artist's capture – the opening sequences of Peter Grimes; Maggie Hambling's Scallop; her Waves. Snape, and the estuary reeds, the sight of marsh harrier. The walk from Dunwich to Southwold. The waterfront in Ipswich, the sweep of the bridge.

The sea is an ever present reality in Suffolk. However far West you go, its tidal rhythm is never far from mind; or from reality, as the rivers snake inland.

And so, yes, John Masefield's famous poem, and some verses from psalm 104 this afternoon: a psalm that reminds us of God's creative power.

O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. Yonder is the sea, great and wide, creeping things innumerable are there, living things both small and great. There go the ships, and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.

So often, at this annual harvest festival, we focus on the work of farmers – and yes – thank you, for all you do. I know you'll be glad it's not as wet as it has been; that you can now get on with the winter drilling. Thank you for coming today, to join with the rest of the county to give thanks to God, and to give thanks for those who have given their all to the land. Thank you from the rest of us, for the food we eat; for all you do to ensure this nation is fed.

In my seven years as Dean, though, we haven't spared much thought, at this service, for the sea, for the fishermen who catch our fish and chips – well, not the chips, obviously. Who brave the seas to draw out what God so generously provides, who harvest the living things both small and great.

Today the collection goes to the Fishermans Mission.

Let me tell you a little of what they do, as they take the compassion of Christ around our UK coastline, providing a lifeline of welfare and support for our fishermen and their families. They are the only fishermen's charity that provides emergency support alongside practical, financial, spiritual and emotional care. They help all fishermen, active or retired, and their families, and have done so since 1881.

You may not know that fishing remains the most dangerous peacetime occupation in the UK. Our fishermen face danger and difficulty every day. Death and serious injury are often the true cost of the fish we enjoy. Retired fishermen and their families struggle with poverty and chronic ill health following a life at sea.

Here's some facts; some figures from the Marine Accident Investigation Branch for the period 2005-2015. On average, one UK fisherman is killed every 6 weeks. One UK fishing vessel lost at sea every 20 days. One UK fisherman injured every 7 days. Were you aware? I wasn't. Only a week or so ago the FV Solstice sank claiming the life of Plymouth fisherman Tony Jones. His son Nick and a fellow crewman clung to the upturned hull of their boat for seven hours until rescued.

In Lowestoft and around the coastline of East Anglia from Kings Lynn in Norfolk to Canvey Island in Essex the work of the Fishermen's Mission remains as busy as ever. Active fishermen from around 42 different ports, inlets and harbours are cared for along with their retired colleagues and families. Welfare and pastoral caring forms the main bulk of the work of the Mission, and they are always on call for any emergency. There is a true cost of our fish and chips; and the reality behind the statistics are the families, children, loved ones, friends and grief-stricken communities left behind. So please, do give something crisp into the collection when the time comes.

Of course, the costs are not only human – in all our farming and fishing.

There go the ships, and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.

Robert MacFarlane, one of our leading contemporary nature writers, tells of the debris that is discarded in the sea, and of the cost to wildlife of the human impact on the environment. Leviathan – that

wonderful and ancient word for the whale, created by God to sport in the sea – and what a sight that is; to watch whales playing, singing, their enormous, awesome bulk at home in the sea.

MacFarlane writes this, of a beach walk with his friend:

Richard and I stopped there to comb the stony beach. Lurid debris was everywhere: blue milk bottle crates, pitted cubical chunks of furniture foam, cigarette butts, bottle caps, aerosol canisters and Tetrapak cartons, printed with faded lettering in dozens of languages.

Thousands of tons of debris wash up each year on the coasts of Britain and Ireland. The amount is increasing annually, and the effect of this debris, beyond its visual impact, is severe. Whales, dolphins and porpoises are dying, their digestive tracts blocked by plastic. A minke whale washed up on the Normandy coast in 2002 was found to have nearly a ton of plastic packaging and shopping bags in its stomach. Seals and seabirds are becoming entangled in the 'ghost' fishing nets which – abandoned or lost from trawlers – drift through the sea.

Whether fisher or farmer, whether consumer or tourist, we need to know, far more responsibly, the costs of our needs and desires.

Today we give thanks, but we also turn to God, the creator and giver of all good things, and we say sorry. We are here to promise to bring to the natural world a much greater reverence. God calls humanity to be wise; to act responsibly in creation, a steward of the world that God has made. The beautiful world God has made, which is everywhere described in the Bible. Psalm 104 is a song of praise to

God the creator. God who can be seen in the light, and wind; wrapped in light as in a garment; riding on the wings of the wind. And the myriad diversity of the created world is there: the leviathan, playing in the deep; the animals of the forest, the birds of the air. And from the rich gifts of creation, humanity is satisfied. Fish, meat, vegetables, wine, oil, bread. What more could humanity need? This is a God whose love reaches beyond the farthest star; is deeper than the deepest ocean; is greener than the greenest green.

A God whose glory fills the earth.

The psalms also call for a proper accountability. It is expressed clearly when things go wrong; when humanity is not wise in its relationship with creation. Psalm 18, for instance, where we hear the Psalmist expressing God's lament, God's anger, even, at a sinful humanity that is careless, unwise, in its treatment of the world. When humanity disrupts that divine order, then the Psalmist is clear: God's wrath, disappointment and anger is expressed.

God, the creator of this planet earth. Humanity, in Genesis, is given responsibility for the created order. With that responsibility comes not the right to exploit, but the responsibility of stewardship. Now, I know this is complex. I know the pressures of a changing political scene, where uncertainty about the future and anxiety is real, as we contemplate hard times.

However, it's still imperative that we make changes to our lifestyles – particularly those of us who are consumers. But of course, that's all of us. As we buy our fish, our meat and vegetables, what pressure can we bring to reduce the amount of plastic used?

Christians bring some deep thinking to commend hope and faith in God. This faith can contribute a great deal to inspire people to change.

Given what we are doing to the sea and the land, what is required of us? We can and should train ourselves to take and use only what we need; training our appetites, away from greed and selfishness. And we should insist, when we can, that we don't buy our food, packaged in plastic.

We have tremendous power as consumers. If we want our Suffolk food and fish to be consumed, and of course we do, let's make sure it's packaged in ways that don't damage the environment. Paper rather than plastic; loose rather than packaged. Suffolk produce, Safely packaged.

Let's give thanks today as we support the work of the Fisherman's Mission. Let's also repent and change, and live differently on this planet, with the intense current pressures it faces. Let's act, fully aware of the damage we do to the natural environment. Let's use less plastic; let's pick it up when out and about. Let's not discard it in the first place.

Let us go from this Cathedral today, with thankful hearts but also knowing that the natural world that provides so much needs us to care for it, not turn it into a rubbish tip.

So the God-given Leviathan, the birds and the fish, can sport without danger, and numbers grow in God-given abundance.