

Why Conserve Nature?

As many of you know, this week we lost a fellow of the college who has been very active here for over twenty years. This is why the flag has been flying at half-mast. Many of you will remember Steve for various reasons. Not least, it was he – in consultation with Professor Hooker – who wrote our marvellous Chapel Guide that can be found on our college website.

But today, you will notice that our readings and music concern the visit of the shepherds to see the infant Jesus soon after his birth. What does the adoration of the shepherds have to do with Steve Trudgill. Well – as it happens, the shepherds' adoration of Jesus. I hope you'll forgive me for an act of homiletical acrobatics – but the dynamic of the shepherd's adoration does converge with the overall thrust of a book Steve had recently finished.

The series of talks from this term and last term, were put together to coincide with the publication of Steve's forthcoming book, *Why Conserve Nature?*, which is due to be published next month. Originally, he had agreed to give a talk in this series, even if only via zoom. So today, I will try to give the talk on his book, a talk that I think he might have given. Now, if there is one thing Steve seemed to hate, it was other people trying to summarise his work – so I tread carefully, and with the proviso that this is only my interpretation of Steve's book. You'll be able to read it for yourself soon enough.

I think part of the reason Steve did not like to be summarised, is that he seemed reluctant to take a position. It was notoriously difficult to get from Steve, what he himself actually thought. On the question of Nature, his interest lay more in unmasking how we speak about nature, how we understand nature, how nature holds a mirror up to us, how we bring our own stories, and histories, and assumptions. So when we talk about climate change, or global warming, or ecosystems, or nature itself, regardless of whether we are activists for climate justice, or deniers of climate change. What does our language about nature say about who we are? If anything, I think his book holds a mirror up to us – so that, perhaps, nature might reveal something of who we are.

For example. Years ago, I was on holiday in Scotland, where we used to swim in the painfully cold waters of the highland rivers. And we parked up at Glencoe, to swim beneath the waterfall. And next to us, was a coach load of semi-retired American tourists, in socks and sandals and sunhats. And I heard this married couple marvelling at sight. The wife was talking about the beauty of God's creation, as these silver waters cascaded through the bleak and rugged wilds of the highland terrain. Her husband looked at her, shook his head, and said, "They ought to put a turbine in there to create electricity. Look at all that power going to waste."

Two people from the same context, looking at the same view, and seeing two very different sights. Not at all to say that these are incompatible sights. Beauty and pragmatism need not be at odds. But what these two people saw in this wonder of nature, revealed something about who they were. That, it seems to me, is the question Steve's new book is asking. I thought it might be worth exploring that question from two perspectives:

On the one hand – the perspective of a climate-change deniers. And by this, I mean something different from pro-Trump types who think climate change is a liberal conspiracy for God-knows-what reason. I refer rather to those who accept the theory of climate change – but it will have no effect on their lifestyle. Will it affect their holidays, their flights, their motor vehicles, their carbon output? Not. At. All. So – what will such people hear from nature? Of course, if that is me – I can still enjoy nature. I can enjoy scenery, and walks in the woodland, and paddles along the river. I can go boating, horse-riding, skiing and scuba-diving. I can marvel at the beauty of birdsong, and sunsets, and David Attenborough. But no matter how much I enjoy nature, it exists to entertain me, it exists to help me relax or bring me comfort. If that is me, will I ever be able to hear nature say anything to me? Probably not much, when I watch it through the window of an aeroplane, or through the window in my busy schedule, or through a digital screen. I might just refer to what is happening out there, as happening ‘out there’, climate change. It’s neutral. It has little to do with me, and I have little to do with it. Climate change. A neutral term for a disengaged mindset. Let me be clear, this is not what Steve would say. But these are the kinds of questions and challenges Steve’s book provokes.

On the other hand, what if I am an Extinction Rebellion activist for instance? I tread carefully here, because I am a supporter of XR – and spoke at their protest in Cambridge two years ago. As an XR activist, what might I see in nature? Possibly, a victim. A passive recipient of human abuse. What is my relation to nature likely to be? Words like, ‘Climate emergency’ are more likely to reflect my position. An emergency that affects us all. Words like abuse, pillage, capitalist death-machine, doomsday clock and so on – reflect an alarmism. And what does that say about our engagement with nature? Will nature really suffer from human abuse? Now that we have entered the Anthropocene era, won’t the world simply vomit the human race out of its ecosystems, and settle into an alternative, post-human natural state?

No matter who we are, we have a way of engaging with nature, hearing nature, of speaking about nature. Though – as Steve and I have discussed – even the word nature can be problematic. The word nature, a noun, is seen by many as an attempt to reduce the Living World, the voice of the other, the wild and untameable strangeness of the outside, into something static, domesticated, controllable. But – and here is the challenge – is it possible to hear the natural world speak to us with a voice of its own? Given the assumptions, the commitments, the white noise of our modern society, is it possible to hear the living world offer a voice of its own? Can Nature call us?

Here, a question Steve used to ask his first-year students at their first supervision in Cambridge is helpful. Outside his office was a beautiful tree, and Steve would ask, “Does that tree know it’s Tuesday morning?” Steve never told me how his students answered.

But the day Steve told me that, I presented the question to a biologist who replied. “The tree might not know it’s Tuesday, but it bloody well knows it’s morning.”

What Steve seemed to do, was to highlight how readily we attribute human characteristics to nature. Anthropocentrism: imposing our assumptions and characters and attributes to the stuff out there. And for sure, there are lazy humanities scholars as well as crackpot scientists who will all-too-quickly find human qualities in the non-human world, mostly because they want to find them there. Steve was always very suspicious of this.

The flip side of this, it seems to me, is that denying from the outset that non-human life can exhibit human-like properties/attributes, is the worst kind of anthropocentrism. That is, deciding-in-advance that plants, for instance, *cannot* have their own version of what we clumsily call 'language' or 'communication' or 'intelligence' etc, is to issue dictates about the world beyond our knowing, in the name of humility. And it is the 'worst' kind of anthropocentrism, because it regards itself as sensitive to such a charge (often quite piously). Deciding in advance, whether the natural world can exhibit human-like qualities is highly, if unwittingly, anthropocentric.

These are the discussions Steve loved to provoke, and to hear, and to argue about. And so, for the rest of this term, we will be exploring related questions from multiple perspectives. Ultimately, they boil down to our capacity to hear the other. To listen well to the world out there, whatever we call it. And to have our unwittingly pious moral sensitivities exposed to the disturbing voice of the other. Can we hear the call of the natural world? Steve Trudgill seemed to have been asking that question throughout his career, and encouraging us to ask that same question. Can we hear the call of the natural world?

Intercessions

Lord we thank you for the living world, in which we live and breathe and have our being. We thank you for the complex patterns that interweave our lives with others, no matter how distant, no matter how close.

And so today, we pray for the natural world. When we regard it as an undiscovered territory to explore and enjoy and use for our own entertainment – awaken us to the consequences of our actions. To the impact that our lifestyles can have on the living world and in turn, on the lives of others. Show us what it means to tread lightly on the earth – so that whatever joy we experience at your creation, springs from our quest to hear the living world speak back to us.

When we regard the natural world as nothing more than a source of profit, a treasury to plunder, when we behave like a vampire squid wrapped around the face of the planet – awaken us to nature's capacity to answer back. Open our ears, that we may see something other than pound signs and hear something other than cash registers. Save us from self-justification, and free us to hear to the living world speak back to us.

Tonight, we also remember Steve Trudgill, and the questions he put to us. His capacity to provoke anger, and to provoke thought. His ability to unmask stories we unwittingly treasure, and to reveal truths we don't want to hear. His readiness to speak his mind, and to listen more carefully than many realised. We thank you for his commitment to this college, to this community, to this social ecosystem. We thank you for his lifelong desire to hear the voice of the living world.

As the church recalls today, the Shepherd's adoration of the infant Jesus – at once, both a pathetic bundle of limbs, and a microcosm of unexpected power – so help us to relate to the living world around us, with adoration, with awe, with humility and with joy.