

## The Chaplain writes...*about the powers of nature*

Some years back, whilst I was still in Inverness, one fine day in August (we did *sometimes* have them – though not with the abundance of Geneva!) I sat on the swing in our delightful walled garden enjoying the warmth of the sun and a cup of coffee, and listening to the sound of bees, who were buzzing around a Lavender bush which – it further delighted me – seemed to be flourishing in our northern climes. There were so many bees that morning, and as I watched their diligent efforts, I decided upon a subject for our forthcoming Cathedral Magazine, and promptly took a close up photograph of one of the bees gathering the nectar from the Lavender. It was a remarkably successful photograph – and when it appeared (in full colour) on the front of the Magazine for the following month, you could quite clearly see the gossamer wings and every detail of the bee's body – and perhaps the photographer might even claim in a flight of fancy – a sense of the determined concentration of effort of the small creature!

Now I have always been fascinated by bees, and insofar as it is possible for someone to develop affection for an insect, even *fond* of them. Looking again at my photograph, seeing again the *fragility* of the creature's wings on which it depends for the huge distance that it travels each day on its excursions collecting nectar, and thinking of the size of the bee, it seems even more remarkable to think that the humble bee is responsible for hundreds of millions of pounds in the British agricultural economy. And huge amounts across the world. Thankfully for us, the bee has been around (no pun intended!) for at least fifty million years on our planet (that's ten times longer than we humans have at the best estimate!) and bees have learnt remarkable skills both in the production of honey, the perpetuation of their species and in the pollination of plants.

That such a small creature plays such a significant part in the maintenance of life as we know it is truly remarkable. And perhaps it would be hardly worth commenting on were it not for something which has begun to cause problems.

One of the things that pleased me on that August day back in 2009 was the fact that there appeared to be so many bees around. For

since the mid 1970s, bee populations the world over have been on the decline. So much so that *all* the feral bees from the United States have now disappeared. European bees have been blighted by a series of different infections, and whole colonies have been killed off during their overwintering. Other pests have significantly reduced bee populations in Europe as well as in other parts of the world. Some of this has been attributed to the use of certain agricultural pesticides – and their banning by the European Union has led to a slight recovery. But pesticides are not the only problem. Global warming is also a threat to our wingèd friends, something at last officially recognised by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in 2014.

The bees' wings are a good symbol for the fragility of our ecosystems. And a reminder of the enormous power inherent in these ecosystems. Chaos theory's *Butterfly effect* classically spoke of the effect of a butterfly beating its wings in one part of the world several weeks later being felt in the shape of a major weather event. Small, apparently insignificant things have enormous power. If we lose bees from our planet, then we are in very serious trouble. Agriculture will suffer irreversible change – and it will become (as things are at present) impossible to sustain life.

During this time of the Church's year, we contemplate *creation*. We have enormous responsibilities in the created order – which can be exercised for good or ill. Scientists developed pesticides to improve yields of certain crops. It is therefore seriously disturbing to discover that this very action, without thought of the consequences for natural life, may result in total crop failures if there are no pollinating insects left.

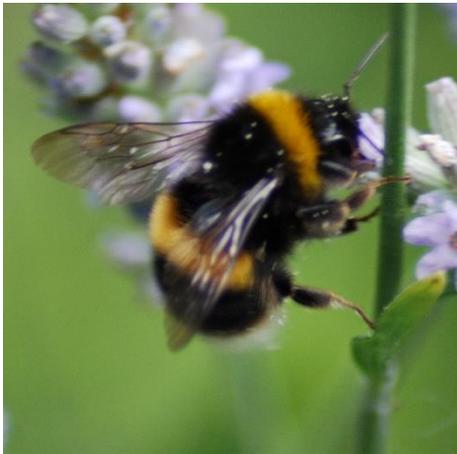
Of course we hope and pray that such a thing will not happen, and probably it will not. Yet the danger is present. Not just for bees, but for other significant life-forms.

Not all insects have the charm and grace of the honey bee. My homeland Scotland has a singularly unpleasant creature, only just visible to the naked eye, and known as the *Scottish midge*, the females of which species are blood-suckers. Although some of us find their bites an unpleasant nuisance rather than a serious problem, many people will react very badly to the saliva of the thirsty midge,

producing huge and very irritant inflamed weals on the skin. Some years back, the University of Aberdeen researched a means of eradicating the midge from the Highlands of Scotland. Although the midge is tiny, they sometimes are found to have an even smaller mite, a mini-louse, that feeds upon them. Scientists genetically modified this louse in a way which rendered their carriers, the female midge, sterile. Three cheers went up – but then a question arose. What if..... And the eradication programme never happened.

That was an occasion when the technological exploitation of scientific knowledge stopped before it was too late. There are some questions that we just don't know the answers to, and once certain things have been done, there is no turning back.

I am too much of a scientist to want to suggest for a moment that we should not seek to change our own human chemistry through drugs, or help our environment to be more productive, or to do any of the many things that the technological exploitation of scientific knowledge does. This is an important part of our calling by God to be those who shape our environment – part of Adam's call to look after and care for the Garden in which he is set. What we must take care is to do this as responsibly and thoughtfully as possible. Knowing that, although our abilities are great, the forces of nature are greater. Recent global events in changing weather patterns remind us repeatedly of the strength and power of natural forces. The risks of which we cannot eliminate from our risk-averse postmodern world.



Though we *can* do a lot more to prevent disharmony in our environment and its species. Starting with the *small* things.

For even the smallest creatures have significance and power too. Just contemplate the fragility of the bees' wings.

*Alec Gordon*

***LATER in OCTOBER:*** a 'Family Eucharist' with a difference. For some time I have been looking at ways to make the monthly family Eucharist more of a truly 'family' occasion. On October 23, the 10h30 Eucharist will have a 'Kenyan flavour' – with permission, we shall use the Kenyan rite of the Eucharist, have some African music, and afterwards a Kenyan 'apero' to share. And from time to time, I hope that we shall be able to repeat this exercise to embrace other parts of our global family at Holy Trinity Church. So please make a note of the date and come along to the 10h30 Eucharist, to delight in our diversity as a community here in Geneva.

*Alex Gordon*