

# MARK'S MESSENGER

*The Parish Magazine of  
St Mark's Church, Broomhill and Broomhall, Sheffield*

June 2026



Photo by Robert Booth

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## HELENA: *Play*

**“And on the seventh day God laughed, and rested, and enjoyed his glorious creation” (*Storybook Bible*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu).**

We don't often read, hear or talk about God laughing and there are no specific passages in the Gospels that tell us that Jesus laughed. John Chrysostom famously claimed, “Jesus never laughed but he did weep and also declared that those who mourn are blessed”. Do we really think that Jesus didn't laugh?

I wonder if this lack of specific reference to divine laughter has influenced the historical mistrust and unease of laughter and festivity in the church and, at times, led us to taking ourselves so seriously that we forget the significance of joy. Do we delight in our faith?

Have you ever noticed clergy or people walking as part of a procession in churches and cathedrals smiling? (Having said this, we do need to grant a bit of leeway here, as I know from experience processions can be accompanied by my concentration face as I'm ensuring I don't trip and know where I'm processing to!).

As I see things, laughter, play and festivity are central to an incarnational faith and to living as an Easter people in the light of the resurrection. I think it is part of the reason that I am drawn to figures like Archbishop Desmond Tutu who was famous for his infectious giggle. He knew the importance of not taking oneself too seriously whilst being absolutely committed to speaking out against oppression and that which stifles humanity and creation.

My curiosity about play and re-creation led me to write my Master's thesis on the topic, so if you will allow for a bit of self-indulgence, I thought I would share some of my thoughts from my thesis to give an understanding of the significance of play.

“Play allows us to explore ideas and possibilities outside of our own experience and is imperatively vital if we are to have faith in an unseen, mysterious God. It is perhaps not surprising that in a world of reason and fact we see the demise of an ineffable and wondrous God and lose sight of the image of God in humanity.”

In a wonderful theological essay on Festivity and Fantasy (1969) Harvey Cox exhorts the significance of festivity and fantasy: “Fantasy is the richest source of human creativity...it is the image of the creator God in man (sic.). Like God, man in fantasy creates whole worlds ex nihilo – out of nothing”. And one of my favourite quotes on all time: “Without real festive occasions and without the nurture of fantasy, man’s spirit as well as his psyche shrinks. He becomes something less than a man, a gnat with neither origin nor destiny”.

Through play and engaging with our creative side we find ourselves joining with the daily re-creation of the Creator, laughing at ourselves and, with God, laughing at our glorious creation.

The questions to myself and to you are: How can we make time for play? What does ‘play’ look like for us? How do we join in the festivity and how can we help others to join in too? Lastly, what can I learn about the Creator God through my play and re-creation?

I leave you with a thought to ponder as you play!

This is what it is to wrestle with God:  
To awaken to all that is in and around you  
To name truths known in the body  
And falsities imposed outwith  
To catch a song on the breeze  
And lift first your head  
Then a foot, to dance  
To own oneself  
To speak  
To love  
To be.

This is what it is to dance with God-  
Not locked in an exhausted embrace,  
But alive and energised

***(Grosch- Miller, 2014)***



***Helena***

## EASTER AND GODLY PLAY

"There was once a person who loved to explore the woods. They climbed trees and sat up in the branches. They threw sticks into the stream and they paddled. Sometimes they got dirty and sometimes they got lost. But they felt free and they felt connected. There were always new things to discover. Time passed and the person was older. They knew the way through the woods now."

This is the Out of the Box story that I shared with the children last week as a playful way into exploring what our church (and church community) look and feel like. In the same way that playing through the lens of the Very Hungry Caterpillar enabled us to explore the Easter Story with fresh eyes, this story enabled the children to enter into a much deeper exploration of what the important elements of church are: i.e. the elements that help them to feel free and connected within this community.



This photo represents the many aspects that they shared alongside some of the explanations in their own words:

Facilitator: "What does our church look like?"

The children began by creating the physical elements: the building, the green, the car park. Then they began to hone into more detail: the altar, special cloths and robes for the altar and clergy, candles, trees on the green.

Then someone suggests putting in an open door.

Facilitator: "I wonder what church feels like? What does our community feel like?"

Someone placed down the heart within the open door.

Colours were placed down to represent the stained glass.

The sky was made blue and a sunshine placed down. Simultaneously a larger sun was created, "Yellow representing the sun and God looking down on church," they said.

"We need people."

"Let's place them in a circle and put the heart in the middle of them".

"Here's the stars to show everyone who's been connected."

Facilitator: "Do you mean people from the past and present?",

"Yeah!"

"Candles represent the light in the church."

10 people are around the edge of the circle: "10 people who have created this scene."

Facilitator: "There's a river on the green?!"

"Its a river of hope!"

"There was once a person who loved to explore the woods. They climbed trees and sat up in the branches. They threw sticks into the stream and they paddled. Sometimes they got dirty and sometimes they got lost. But they felt free and they felt connected. There were always new things to discover. Time passed and the person was older. They knew the way through the woods now."

**Hannah Jones**

## SWIFT-WATCHING



Recently, after Sunday Eucharist, Flora Blackwater from Sheffield Swift Network gave us a talk to celebrate the installation of our 8 new swift boxes (providing 16 nests) and to learn more about one of nature's most extraordinary birds – the swift. We learnt that these aerial acrobats have been gracing our skies for 49 million years. They are perfectly adapted for life on the wing. They eat, drink, sleep, and even mate in flight – only landing in their cavity-nests, usually in the eaves of a roof to raise their chicks. Flora described her astonishment and delight in these wonderful birds which has led her to do everything she can to save them from extinction.

But despite their ancient resilience, swifts are now in critical decline. Populations have plummeted by 70% in just 30 years, and they are now on the UK Red List of endangered species. Why? The answer lies in the way we build. For millennia, swifts have nested in cavities in our homes and buildings and not in the trees or cliffs. But modern construction and renovations seal up or do not provide these vital spaces. Add to this the increasing impact of more extreme weather caused by climate change, and the picture is bleak.

Flora's message was clear: we are designing extinction into our buildings.

Yet, there is hope – installing artificial nests increases swift populations, so it starts with us. The Sheffield Swift Network is campaigning for the widespread installation of swift bricks in new builds and retrofitting bricks and boxes where possible. These simple, affordable solutions provide permanent nesting sites and could reverse the decline if adopted at scale. The goal? 250,000 swift bricks in the UK within five years.



Photo by Jan-Eric Bullet

We look forward to welcoming the first swifts to our new boxes here at St. Mark's. Watch the gaps in the north elevation over the porch for signs of swifts exploring our boxes this summer and let us all know if you spot any! We would love to inspire other churches to fit boxes so please talk about our project and signpost people to the Swift Network for expert help.



Photo by Jan-Eric Bullet

**If you can, please donate towards our boxes.**

Each box cost £35, including installation. Donate via the church bank account marking your donation 'SWIFTS' or speak to our treasurer David Armstrong.

What more can we do?

- Provide a home: Install a swift brick or box – they last decades for site-faithful birds.
- Unleash your soffits: If you have soffits blocking old nest sites, consider adding a soffit box or drilling access holes.
- Protect existing nests: Never disturb active nests (it's illegal), and plan ahead before roof repairs.
- Help find colonies: survey your street and report sightings via the Swift Mapper app.

***Margaret Ainger***

## SOMETHING OUT OF NOTHING

If you don't know me, I am a retired music teacher, and I sing in the St Mark's choir. I am grateful to Frances for inviting me to write this article.

I wonder what it is that makes us distinctly human. Anyone who has ever shared their life with a dog or a cat, or who has watched a wildlife documentary about elephants, for example, will know it is not the ability to communicate with others, or to empathise, or to have the capacity to feel strong emotions.

We are unique among all the other animals for having developed intricately subtle language skills, but it is perhaps our capability, I would suggest our need, to make things, to be creative, that really marks us out. And we start doing so at a very early age, scribbling with crayons on pieces of paper. It is innate.

I think the person who wrote the first chapter of Genesis was a quiet genius. It is a very gentle and loving portrayal of God as Creator, making something out of nothing, not in some random sort of way, but with care and thought, and having a clear, structured plan in mind. And we are all made in the image of God.

I can remember first becoming fascinated by sound from when I was about three. I recall being in church, my mother holding me, and seeing the sunlight streaming through the stained glass, while hearing music and being transported by it. I am pretty sure that I was listening to Parry's setting of the hymn *O praise ye the Lord*, which has a particularly striking and uplifting change of key quite early on. I felt elated on hearing it. If I were to describe the experience using colours, I would say red, gold and silver dancing and playing together, mingled with a touch of blue.

My parents owned a baby grand piano. At about the same age I began to pick out tunes on the keyboard, but what really captivated me was when I held the sustain pedal down, played some notes, and heard the amazingly rich overtones and depth of the sound reverberating around.

Since childhood I have been motivated to try out a variety of ways of being creative: painting, drawing, cooking, writing, even rather ham-fistedly making small items of furniture, but it is in the field of composing and arranging music that I have felt the most fulfilment. I do not finish working at a piece until I am satisfied that every single note is in the place where I want it to be.

I set out on this journey by hearing songs and trying to copy them on the piano, playing by ear. Mike Batt was a possibly surprising major influence on me. He was the leader of The Wombles, and we had their first LP, *Remember You're A Womble*. I listened to it often. It contains a wide range of songs in different styles, and I learned to play them all, subconsciously picking up how to create interesting and effective chord sequences.

From there it was a short step to writing my own songs. Now a teenager, I played guitar in a church youth group where another member of the group had a gift for writing lyrics, some of which I then set to music. We performed several of the songs in church services, alongside other pieces. I was also having piano lessons by this time and was greatly inspired by the music of Bach, Mozart and Debussy in particular, so I started to compose short pieces in an attempt to imitate them. Looking back, I realise that these pieces weren't very good, (unlike the songs, which were more than passable), but the process turned out to be an excellent grounding for future work.

When I then started studying A-Level Music in the Sixth Form I found that I struggled with learning about the history of composers, but that I did excel in writing short exercises in the style of Bach, Corelli and Haydn, and I began to learn more about how to create a solid foundation for a piece of music by using chord sequences as an integral part of the structure. This practice is known as using Functional Harmony, in which a sense of flow and progression results from playing a chord and then choosing another chord which sounds as though it follows on naturally from the first, and so on. You can also create a sense of surprise or tension by selecting a chord which doesn't follow on so naturally.

When I got to university, reading Music, I was astonished to discover that I was the only student in my year who had done any sort of free composition before. These days everyone is encouraged to compose music when they are at school. It's part of the curriculum, and, incidentally, Mike Batt was largely responsible for that enlightened, ground-breaking initiative, but that's another story.

During my teaching career the thing I enjoyed most was showing students how to compose their own music. You don't need to be especially talented to write a song: everyone can produce something worthwhile, if they are just given the resources, (a simple keyboard is enough), and the encouragement to do so

I wouldn't pretend to have anything like as much ability as Benjamin Britten, but we do have one thing in common. In simple terms, most of our music is solidly based on traditional harmonies with what might sound like occasional "wrong notes" thrown in.

I have mostly written quite short pieces lasting three or four minutes at most. These include anthems, piano pieces and incidental music for school plays, performed by a small group of instruments. I also have two more substantial pieces to my name. The first is an eight minute piece for organ called *A Meditation on Down Ampney* – the hymn tune to which *Come down, O Love divine* is sung. This was written for and performed by a colleague of mine in a school concert in St Mark's in the early 1990s.

The second is an eighteen minute setting for choir, organ, piano and double bass of *De Profundis*, Psalm 130. I wrote this during lockdown, but it is yet to be performed. The philosophy of my first composition teacher at university was that it was the act of writing a piece that was important, and any subsequent performance would be icing on the cake. I do feel quite satisfied with what resulted.

When I am asked to arrange a hymn or a song I try to reflect the original composer's intentions as much as possible, while adding in something original of my own. Maybe a descant, or a reharmonisation of one of the verses. I also like to include some variety in each verse, for example by changing the combination of voices and instruments as the music progresses. I particularly enjoy arranging folk songs and mediaeval music, as it is often only a single melody which is provided, which gives great scope for invention in the accompaniment. Folk songs can be arranged in several different styles: for anything from just a single voice plus a piano, to a full choir and an instrumental ensemble; in a gentle classical style, or for a hard rock band, or anything in between.

I have the greatest admiration for professional composers who can produce prodigious amounts of music for large ensembles: symphonies, concertos, operas and such like, although they do sometimes go on for too long, in my opinion. Yes Mahler – I'm looking at you. However, I am perfectly happy writing miniatures.

**Andrew Sanderson**

**Logos Returns!**  
**Online Bible Study**  
**First Wednesdays, 7.00–8.30 pm, on Zoom**  
**Commencing Wednesday 3 June 2026**

**Christian Beginnings,**  
**according to the Acts of the Apostles**

Have you ever wondered how an insignificant movement within first century Judaism became a world religion? Or why its crucified leader became worshipped as divine? Or why his brother, James, became its leader, when he hadn't been counted among the Twelve?

Have you ever wondered why someone who had never met Jesus and who violently opposed his movement would become one of its most effective advocates? Or why Jesus who preached the good news of God's rule would become the good news himself? Or what became of Jesus' ministry of healing and hospitality or why baptism became the Christian rite of initiation?

Have you ever wondered why Gentiles living throughout the Mediterranean would come to believe that a crucified Jew had anything to do with them? Or what role the Holy Spirit played in the conception and growth of the early church ... or what form worship took in the early Jesus movement or what characterised its common life or informed its beliefs and practices ... or how leadership was exercised or decisions were reached ... or how Christian allegiance affected kinship, societal and cultural affiliations?

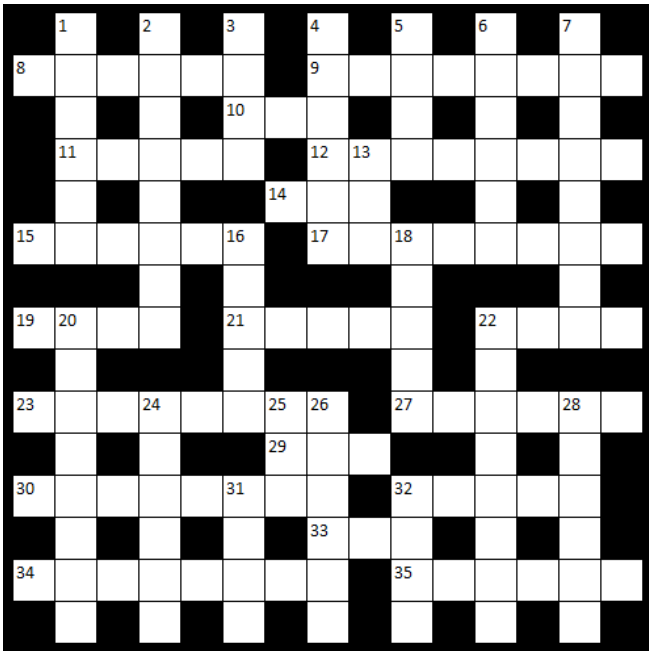
These are just some of the questions and issues we will encounter in the Acts of the Apostles, the earliest surviving account of Christian beginnings and one which continues to shape the life of the church today. Each session will begin with a presentation introducing the biblical passage under consideration. This will be followed by open discussion as we delve deeper into its meaning and explore its message for us today.

No prior knowledge is needed – only an open, inquisitive mind and desire to discover more about the Christian Way. The Logos Zoom Link will be included in the weekly email and is available from the Church Office on [office@stmarkssheffield.co.uk](mailto:office@stmarkssheffield.co.uk).

*Ian Wallis*

## Hybrid crossword

Across clues are cryptic, down clues are not. Solvers might spot some thematic words and phrases within the puzzle as a whole.



### Across

- 8 Nudge Head of Gardening at gardening centre to exhibit flower (6)
- 9 "I can be spotted basking in bays and seas, essentially:" – a turtle, with time to spare, swimming (8)
- 10 Naval vessel's deck ratings covered over (3)
- 11 *East of Eden*: complicated love story (5)
- 12 Type of animal first seen in Cambridge (8)
- 14 Earl occasionally meets knight by river (3)
- 15 English king, briefly German ruler originally (6)
- 17 Nonsensically, Salvation Army to be stationed in pub? Well, now and then, yes ... (8)
- 19 Step-father takes on the Church of England (4)
- 21 Instrumentalist is very good at piano, for short time (5)
- 22 Xysti often featured one of these athletes providing sprint exercise tips (4)
- 23 Tougher for French vineyard established on English lines? I'm not sure (8)
- 27 Yikes! Perhaps travelling round Indiana offers an opportunity (6)
- 29 This bird is one that's British (3)
- 30 Hesitates in speech, involuntarily, and stares wildly, enthralled thousands (8)
- 32 Reorganise Religious Education class (5)
- 33 Estate agent swallows drink (3)
- 34 Enlist Mike Read, initially to tour as a singer (8)
- 35 Cold storage compartment, with bulkhead, installed by civil engineer on island – neat! (6)

### Down

- 1 Household cleaning aid, soft and porous (6)
- 2 Upset or adversity, rarely; or a crosspiece (8)
- 3 Repast; an occasion for eating; coarse flour (4)
- 4 Chemical substance, a solution of which has a pH of more than 7 (6)
- 5 Hagen, Hamm and Herne are cities in this region of Germany (4)
- 6 Richards (film director) and MacKenzie (former newspaper editor) both have this first name (6)
- 7 Engenders a sudden sense of fright or alarm (8)
- 13 Common name for a girl or woman (3)
- 16 Oust, eject, drive out (5)
- 18 Nesting underground, this tiny mouselike mammal eats mostly insects and worms (5)
- 20 Somewhere for planes to land and take off (8)
- 22 Early Christian prayer, officially incorporated into the Latin Mass in 687 AD (5,3)
- 24 Catch, using a net (6)
- 25 Regard, attention or awareness (3)
- 26 Appropriate cattle belonging to someone else (6)
- 28 Trick somebody completely, using cunning or deceit (6)
- 31 Estonians, Greeks, Croatians and Austrians use this currency (4)
- 32 Drizzle, downpour and deluge describe various intensities of this (4)

## HANGING OUT WITH THE GOTHS – WHITBY GOTH WEEKEND



For as long as I can remember I have always had a love affair with the beautiful coastal town of Whitby.

Not unlike the devout Catholic who pays a faithful visit to Lourdes, I happily tear myself from Sheffield on the leisurely coach journey to Whitby and freely mingle with the large numbers of Goths celebrating the Hallowe'en Goth Festival. Fed and watered by a refreshing cup of tea and Whitby's famous fish and chips, I stroll to the harbour. As always, I observe the holy site of the ruins of Whitby Abbey on the hill overlooking the town and admire the stationary replica of Captain Cook's *Endeavour* with its towering

masts and sails, now a café and place to drink.

To stay in Whitby on a Goth Weekend is virtually impossible, because all the available accommodation is solidly booked by devotees who visit every year. Bram Stoker, the creator of *Dracula*, would have been delighted to see throngs of Goths descend upon the roads and streets of Whitby. It is as if the characters of Gothic novels and all the Goths' vampires and ghosts decided to meet in one place.



There is no limit to the ghoulish creativity of the Whitby Goths. Top-hatted Victorian undertakers dressed in a sombre shade of black frock coats and trousers are accompanied by women in funeral dresses. Their faces, young and old, are crowned by bonnets and painted a ghastly

pure white, dripping traces of blood red near their black-painted lips.

On the crowded 199 steps leading up to the Abbey in St Mary's Church, I meet a beautiful young vampire, who looks as though she has just walked out of a Hammer horror movie. She's in a black Victorian dress, her face is corpse like, complete with fearful fangs. "I bet you watch a lot of vampire movies", I joke. "Yes, I do", she replies with a smile.

En route to the small, cobbled street just beyond the bridge that spans the sea there is a gruesome assortment of demons, grim reapers and werewolves, and in the space of the streets' crowd is a sea of black. In shop windows the sellers do not waste the opportunity to sell Dracula's Blood Flavoured Ice Cream (probably strawberry) and some sweet shops advertise Dracula chocolate. I wonder what Bram Stoker would have felt about this.



Google defines a Goth as 'A person who will love all that is dark and mysterious. This does not mean Goths are evil.' Most certainly the Goth enjoyment of the Whitby Goth Weekend feeds into the dark Samhain\* celebration of Death, Life and the supernatural as a wonderful excuse to dress up as ghosts and vampires. There is no denying the creepy legend of Dracula and Bram Stoker remains the broad appeal of Whitby. I will never cease to enjoy Whitby Goth Weekends and the ruins of the Abbey.

**Tony Dignam**

\*Samhain (pronounced SAH-win or SOW-in) originates from aelic culture in Ireland, Scotland and the Isle of Man, with roots in Celtic paganism. The name means 'summer's end in Old Irish, symbolising the transition from the light half of the year to the dark half, roughly between the autumnal equinox and winter solstice. Celebrations began at sunset on October 31 and continued into November 1. – *Editor*

## A WHO, NOT AN IT

This started as a book review, but here's a caution: it's more of a series of reflections on a book than a book review. (ed: this is longer than our usual articles, but we thought its free flow reflects the spirit of play.) I have for some time been a fan of Robert Macfarlane's writing, so I was delighted to receive a copy of his most recent book *Is a River Alive?* (Hamish Hamilton, 2025) for Christmas, little expecting it to cause me to profoundly deepen my theological understanding of creation.

### Creation is a Who not an It

Three years or so ago I worked on an article (which never actually saw the light of day) about the Christian responsibility to care for creation. What strikes me about it now is that throughout it I refer to creation as 'It'. But Macfarlane, in talking of rivers as Who, challenged this deeply. If, as I have come to be persuaded, rivers are Who, then is not the whole of creation also Who rather than It?

Somewhere, deep inside the memory of the Church, this truth is known. Even if this was not top of the author's agenda in writing, for me this book brings this aspect of our understanding articulately, brilliantly and beautifully. But in these post Enlightenment days of 'scientific rationalism' we are forgetful, we think it not so.

In the hills of the Schwarzwald, not far from Freiburg im Breisgau lies the Kloster Sankt Peter. In the extravagant baroque ceiling of the library there are two roundels which demonstrate different ways of thinking about creation. In one, a monk looks at a globe and holds his hands above it in awe. In the other, a monk has his hands firmly on the globe, asserting a different relationship with it. It is the former position that I want to reclaim, having read Macfarlane's book.

The more I've thought about this, the more I've recognised that the Judaeo-Christian tradition witnesses to what I call the 'Whoness' of creation. Consider this from Psalm 148

Praise him, sun and moon;  
praise him, all you stars of light.  
Praise him, heaven of heavens,  
and you waters above the heavens....  
Praise the Lord from the earth,  
you sea monsters and all deeps;  
Fire and hail, snow and mist,  
tempestuous wind, fulfilling his word;  
Mountains and all hills,  
fruit trees and all cedars;  
Wild beasts and all cattle,  
creeping things and birds on the wing...

There are plenty of other similar passages in the Hebrew Scriptures, of which what has become the Benedicite, drawn from the Apocryph's addition to Daniel known as *the Song of the Three Young Men* – but now infrequently used – is perhaps the supreme example: Oh all ye works of the Lord, bless ye the Lord: Praise him and magnify him for ever.

But it's not just in words of praise that we find creation as more than an 'It'. Paul writes that 'the whole creation has been groaning together as it suffers together the pains of labour. This, surely, is not the activity of an It.

Increasingly I have come to value what I am discovering in the Franciscan tradition. And I'm not thinking of the piety of the stained glass of Francis and his birds and beasts (because Francis is a great deal more than that). But I am thinking of the majesty of the Canticle of Creation, and of the centrality of the incarnation in Franciscan thought. Cocksedge, Double and Worssam put it this way:

Through incarnation, the one through whom all things were created came to be a creature. This was crucial for Francis and remains a central foundation for Franciscan spirituality: all things are fellow creatures with God's incarnate Son and are therefore brothers and sisters. They can be human or animals but they can also be flowers, rocks, sun, moon and stars, or the elements of earth, water, fire and air.

Elsewhere they write:

If, as Francis believed, the Kingdom of God is now and we are called to participate in it through our lives and how we live, then restoring worth, equality and justice for all people and all things is a central priority. This approach to the

natural world was much more positive than was usual in Francis' time: it remains profoundly counter-cultural to today's consumerist, individualistic and largely secular Western lifestyle.

Starting to change my language to refer, not only to rivers, but to other aspects of the created world, to the use of Who rather than It, begins to reshape my relationship with creation, and my understanding of creation, in a profound manner. This book has helped me regain that sense of awe and aliveness in my understanding of creation. The tricky bit will be changing my language! But if I can do it of God (eschewing masculine pronouns as much as possible) I'm sure I can do it of rivers and nature.

### **Other theological and spiritual resonances**

It's clear, I hope, that a great deal of theological thinking has resulted from my engagement with Macfarlane's writing in this book. Indeed, for me it's shot through with things that connect to theology more generally – especially the theology of creation – as well as with a genuine spirituality. My guess is that MacFarlane would own the latter but might be surprised at the former. Let me illustrate some of this.

In one of his three river-based expeditions, Macfarlane travelled to Ecuador. Among his companions up into the cloud forest where the Rio Los Cedros has its source, was Guiliana, an incredible South American expert on fungus. I was amazed at the following exchange when she used the word 'kindom':

'Kindom?' I ask.

'Yes - I prefer to speak of "kindom", not of "kingdom". Why say "kingdom"? ...

'Who wants monarchy when we're speaking of life? So I say "kindom" - a first, a river, as a gathering of kin'.

Is it just chance that a Latin American woman uses this word, beloved of feminists and some liberationist theologians? Though it is a challenge to a lifetime of using the word with a 'g' in it, I am beginning to appreciate why many theologians try to get us away from the idea of the Kingdom of God to the Kindom of God. To meet the same idea here was staggering – and uplifting.

During his second river visit, a young and inspiring Indian ecologist and warrior for the preservation and restoration of Chennai's waters, says 'To be Is to be related'. This is something we need to remember in an era where atomised individualism still reigns. It has application way beyond the human. Macfarlane also references Thomas Berry, ecologist, historian and scholar of religion, who writes about 'the interdependent Earth community of beings'. All these are aspects of creation theology of which we need to take note.

As regards the spiritual resonances, a phrase such as this: 'I see him ... sit in silence, drifting in that end time radiance', and the recognition of 'a deep and strange serenity, unlike any I have known before, is emerging' light up the sought-for silence. Once this might have been scornfully rejected by many Christians as mere 'nature mysticism'. Yet we surely must see the spiritual wherever people discover it, whether or not it is directly related to God. And just as many Christians – and people beyond the church – are awake to the power of ritual, so too Macfarlane and his companions in the Canadian leg of the book become aware of the power of ritual, even if it may be far from the usual style of church ritual.

'Each day, give something to the earth' (says a first nation woman), 'tobacco perhaps, or even just a word, a prayer, a song. Every day, give something.'

And so they do, finding meaning in the ritual, echoing the human need for the visceral as well as the mental/intellectual.

And how about this as wisdom for Christian spirituality and mysticism to mull over: 'I am learning...to settle into a present-tense state of not-anticipating, of not-knowing.' And 'If you interrogate a mystery, don't expect answers in a language you can understand'

I am grateful to Robert Macfarlane for drawing my attention to these aspects of my quest for 'the Other'.

## **The question (and implications) of nature rights**

Finally on a different note, I was challenged by the development, which Macfarlane references quite frequently, of Nature Rights. Built into the constitution of Ecuador, since 2008, are some articles asserting the Rights of Nature.

'Nature, where life is reproduced and occurs has the right to integral respect and for the maintenance and regeneration of its life cycles, structure, function and evolutionary processes.'

In these articles, human beings are seen as an inseparable part of Nature, not as a distinct, superior quantity.

And from the combination of the Rights of Nature and the 'Whoness' of a river, has come the idea, which I own that I struggle with, of a river being declared a legal person. At the moment, I imagine it's a necessary 'fiction' in order to talk about and preserve a river's rights as a rights bearing legal entity. This is something that comes uneasily to the western mentality. However, the Te Awa Tupua Act, a landmark act of the Aotearoa New Zealand parliament passed in 2017 asserts the personhood of that river. And even in our own country, the Sussex Ouse has been recognised as having rights and legal personhood.

How far we yet have to go truly to recognise that a river is alive: that a river, like nature, has rights! And how different our world would be were we all to take this seriously. *Is a River Alive* is a beautiful and compelling read, whatever thoughts arise out of it. I urge you to read it.

***John Schofield***



## EXPLORING YORKSHIRE



Recently Michael and I have been trying to explore close to home. We began in 2024 visiting Barnsley where Michael spotted a poster advertising museums in the area.

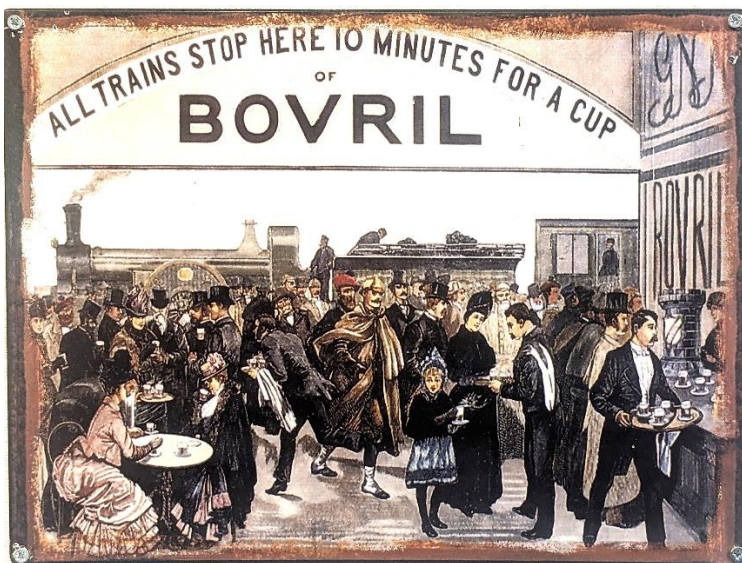
First we visited the village of Cawthorne (5 miles west of Barnsley) by the church, where the museum is housed in a stone building, built thanks to the energy of the Victorian vicar in persuading the local gentry to fund it. Today it is staffed by volunteers, with an amazing collection of items on display ranging from fossils to a stuffed cheetah, a man-trap and a figure of John Wesley made from a whale's vertebra!

This Easter, we explored the village museum in Darfield, east of Barnsley. We were cross when we arrived, having been thwarted trying to visit another local attraction, but this charming little house in the centre of the village soon cured that. Going in, we were welcomed – again by volunteers. We could tell from the hubbub that there were other visitors, but were told that these were locals who come in regularly, attracted by the museum café, serving bacon sandwiches every morning!



The exhibits were perhaps less varied than at Cawthorne, but were arranged in themes, and once again all had been donated by people from the village, perhaps having belonged to parents or grandparents. The room containing domestic items fascinated me, as many of the gadgets were forerunners of items I use today, like the primitive potato masher. Michael enjoyed the room containing old industrial items, and showed his knowledge by identifying a wooden device called a rag pump, a primitive mechanism for extracting water from mine workings, before steam

pumps arrived. He also pointed out an error in the labelling of a camera, so a new caption was needed.



A leaflet in the shop told us that the museum was the legacy of Maurice Dobson, who was born in the village in 1912, but left for work, first as a miner, then in the army and in the hotel business, before returning in 1956. He bought the cottage, and settled there with his partner (Fred) running it first as an off-licence, and later a sweet shop; a magnet for local children although some found him

scary! In retirement Maurice built up a collection of antiques, and it was his wish that the house should become a museum, after his death in 1990.

***Pauline Miller***

## OUR ECO RETROFIT: a warmer, drier, fresher house



Before Retrofit



After Retrofit

For some time we wanted to make our house more energy efficient and less mouldy. When other things needed fixing – the kitchen needed replacing and the conservatory was falling down – we decided it made most sense to renovate and retrofit at the same time. Retrofit is a term sometimes used to describe fitting eco features into an existing building. We live in a detached late-1950s house with cavity walls and bay windows.

We used a firm of architects, specialising in retrofit, recommended by a friend. The architects managed the project, dealing with planning permission, building regs and ensuring we sought advice from other professionals (party wall surveyor, asbestos survey, thermal imaging). They created a detailed project specification plus drawings within our budget, oversaw the process of agreeing the price with our chosen

builder and drew up the contract. Most of the retrofit work was **insulation and ventilation**. If you are adding insulation it is important to have sufficient ventilation to prevent problems with damp.

The works comprised:

- Full rewire
- New kitchen. Gas cooker replaced with electric oven and induction hob
- Anti-draught membrane under ground floor
- 'Always on' extractors in bathroom, utility room, kitchen and loos
- Passive ventilation in the eaves
- All doors and windows replaced/ triple glazed
- Trickle vents in windows in rooms without active extraction
- Old cavity wall insulation extracted, and new injected
- Conservatory demolished and replaced with wooden decking
- Insulation added to the walls below the bay windows

Things we learned:

*Be very clear what you are trying to achieve, from your first conversation with professionals.*

We wanted to make the house cooler in hot weather, and the downstairs is indeed easier to –cool without the conservatory. Insulation not only retains heat in the winter but can help keep it out in the summer. However, more might have been achieved if we had made sure that heat resilience was an explicit aim in the brief from the start.

*There are pros and cons to moving out or living in the building while it is being worked on.*

- Upside - We could see what was happening on a daily basis & make quick decisions.
- Downside 'camping' in a building site for 7 months was hard work! We were very grateful to the Nobles for lending Rachael a spare room to WFH, and to the kind people who fed us!

The pros and cons of moving out would have been:

- Upside – not having to live with the mess.
- Downside – cost of renting and extra insurance. Not being able to keep such a close eye on things.

*There WILL be delays!*

Our contract had a penalty clause for delays, but, reasonably, this did not apply to circumstances beyond the builders' control. We discovered some surprising choices made by previous occupants for which work arounds had to be found. Also, some windows were manufactured differently to the specification, leading to delays until these were replaced.

*Always involve a structural engineer:*

The bay window needed a new lintel to take the weight of the triple glazing. When the new lintel was delivered not quite as specified, it was reassuring that our structural engineer ran some calculations which showed it would still do the job.

*Choose builders you will get along with:*

You will be seeing a lot of them! As well as producing work to a high standard, our builders were very considerate and never forgot that this was our home as well as a building site.

*It was worth it!*

I'm writing this in the sunshine on our lovely new decking. The dining room is lighter without the conservatory, and has better views of the garden. In the winter the house feels warmer and the building is measurably drier. We used to run a dehumidifier in the room where we were drying laundry, and the starting humidity on a damp day would be around 80%. It's now down at 30-40% and we are debating whether to use it at all. We would be very happy to talk to anyone at St Mark's about our experiences.

***Rachael and Russell Hand***

## THE IRAN WAR:

### Painful Truths the World Must Confront

The war involving Iran, the United States and Israel exposed painful truths about modern geopolitics, authoritarianism and the human cost of militarism. Beyond the headlines and military operations, the conflict revealed the failure of both internal repression and foreign intervention to bring democracy, stability or justice to the Middle East. Once again, ordinary people became the primary victims.

First, it is important to state clearly that the Islamic Republic of Iran is not a democratic government. Since the protests of December 2017, November 2019 and the “Woman, Life, Freedom” uprising following the death of Mahsa Amini, thousands of Iranians have been arrested, tortured or killed for demanding basic freedoms.

According to [Amnesty International](#), at least 2,159 people were executed in Iran during 2025, the highest figure recorded in more than four decades. Amnesty described the executions as a deliberate tool of political repression designed to spread fear and silence dissent.

However, recognising the brutality of the Iranian state does not justify war by the United States or Israel. One of the most important realities exposed by the conflict was the failure of Washington and Tel Aviv to achieve their main objective: the collapse of the Iranian political system. Despite bombing campaigns, intelligence operations and economic pressure, the Islamic Republic survived. Even conservative American commentators admitted this. Tucker Carlson warned publicly that regime-change policies towards Iran were reckless and could lead to a catastrophic regional war rather than democracy.

The conflict also demonstrated that Iran had developed much of its missile and drone technology domestically despite decades of sanctions. This exposed the limits of Western pressure. Years of economic warfare failed to prevent Tehran from building military capabilities capable of threatening regional stability and global energy markets.

Another important issue was the timing of the war. Military escalation occurred while diplomatic negotiations were still continuing. Badr al-Busaidi repeatedly stated that negotiations were making progress and that opportunities for compromise still existed. British diplomatic

sources reported by the [BBC](#) also suggested that mediation efforts through Oman had reached a constructive stage before military action intensified. This raises serious questions about whether diplomatic solutions were deliberately undermined.

Iran's strategic position around the Strait of Hormuz gave Tehran significant leverage during the conflict. Even the possibility of disruption to oil shipments caused anxiety in global financial markets.

Rising oil prices increased economic pressure on ordinary people across the world, including in Britain, where millions were already struggling with the cost-of-living crisis. [The Economist](#) warned that instability in the Gulf could trigger wider inflationary shocks and increased fuel costs across Europe.

At the same time, statements made by sections of the American administration reflected the dangers of militarised politics. Threats about "destroying Iran" or returning the country to the "Stone Age" revealed a deeply colonial mentality. Investigations by [CNN](#) and [BBC Verify](#) questioned aspects of American military claims and highlighted contradictions regarding civilian casualties during the conflict.

The war also demonstrated the weakening of uncontested American global power. The United States and Israel failed to eliminate Hamas, failed to destroy Hezbollah, and failed to remove Iran's leadership. In several cases, military escalation strengthened hardline forces rather than weakening them. Similar patterns were seen previously in Iraq and Afghanistan, where foreign intervention deepened instability instead of producing democracy.

Inside Israel, criticism of Benjamin Netanyahu also increased. Opposition figures argued that Netanyahu expanded regional conflict partly to preserve his own political survival. Critics accused him of convincing Washington that external pressure would quickly trigger internal collapse in Iran. This assumption proved false. Many Iranians who oppose the Islamic Republic nevertheless rejected foreign bombing and externally imposed regime change.

Another troubling development was the support given by some supporters of Reza Pahlavi to military intervention by the United States and Israel.

In Britain and Europe, elements within monarchist networks increasingly aligned themselves with sections of the far right,

including figures associated with Tommy Robinson and Nigel Farage. Reporting by [The Guardian](#) has highlighted growing links between anti-Muslim populism, nationalism and sections of the Iranian exile opposition.



School Girls Graves Iran

Ultimately, the greatest victims of this conflict remain ordinary people. Iranian civilians are trapped between domestic repression and foreign militarism. Neither dictatorship nor foreign bombing offers freedom. Genuine democratic change in Iran can only emerge through independent social movements, women's struggles, labour activism and grassroots demands for justice, equality and democracy.

***Manuchehr***

## FILMS AND FILMMAKING

Apart from early exposure to Mickey Mouse cartoons in Iran and Saturday matinee children's serials in Australia, I cannot remember what triggered my interest in serious cinema, but it coincided with the French *La Nouvelle Vague* of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Filmmakers such as Godard (e.g. *Breathless*), Chabrol (*Le Boucher*), Truffaut (*Jules et Jim*; *Les quatre cents coups*; *L'enfant sauvage*) and Resnais (*Hiroshima mon amour*; *Last Year at Marienbad*) broke with traditions and energised filmmaking internationally. I used to go regularly from Bromley to London, to see the latest exciting new film by directors such as Antonioni (e.g. *L'Avventura*) and Fellini (*Le Dolce Vita*; *8½*).



I also went to classic older films at the BFI (British Film Institute) cinema underneath the railway arches on London's South Bank. You could hire 8mm copies of silent classics such as Eisenstein's *The Battleship Potemkin*, Griffiths' *Intolerance* and *Birth of a Nation*, Wiene's *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari*, Dreyer's *Passion of Joan of Arc* and Lang's *Metropolis*. Each came as a set of 400 foot reels playing for about 28 minutes. A friend and I both had 8mm cine projectors so we would get about 10 people together to share the rental cost and by switching between projectors get semi-continuous running.

Earlier I bought my first 8mm cine camera when I was 19. It was made by Kodak and was the equivalent of a Box Brownie stills camera, being very simple with a fixed lens and a wind up clockwork motor. Standard 8 mm format had been developed by Kodak in 1932 to provide a cheaper, more portable alternative to the earlier 16mm film format. The film is created by putting perforations on both sides of 16 mm film. Thus you bought a 25 foot reel of 16mm wide film, ran it through the camera, exposing only one edge of the film. You then turned the spool over and ran the film through again, exposing the other edge. After processing the film is cut down the centre and spliced together to give one roll of 8mm wide film. This gave a 50ft reel lasting about four minutes projected at 16 frames per second.

One big problem was the need to find a darkened place – sometimes simply inside your jacket - to turn over the spool to avoid light fogging of the film edges. It also meant that you could film only in short bursts before having to change films. But it was a good training in basic film-making, learning how to frame shots, to pan smoothly (a tripod was essential to avoid hand shake), to maintain continuity and to tell a story economically via a connected sequence of “takes” of appropriate length. This could all be enhanced by using a titling kit of white or red letters to stick onto different coloured backgrounds for filming as titles, then cutting and editing your film to produce the finished result as a 200 foot reel lasting 15 minutes. An editor was simply a small illuminated screen with a hand cranked reel each side so you could run the film back and forth to decide where to cut it. You then had to join the sections together in the order you had decided, using a splicer to shave and align the ends so they could be bonded using acetone film cement. Good creative activity even if fiddly and time consuming.

The improved Super 8 format, still 8mm wide overall but with smaller perforations to make room for 50% larger film frames, hence with better definition, was introduced in 1965. Cameras became electrically powered with zoom lenses, but the big benefit was cartridge loading, and, unlike with standard 8 mm, you could partially rewind the film to make in-camera double exposures or lap dissolves. Super 8mm certainly gave a better image. Eventually I ended up with a dual format (i.e. Standard and Super 8mm) sound projector. You could have a narrow magnetic stripe added to the edge of your edited films and then record accompanying music and commentary. I became quite competent and gained commendations in amateur film competitions. I was also commissioned to make a promotional film for Grantham Canal Restoration Society, and made one on “Careers in Water Authorities”, enabled by Severn Trent Water Authority, for use in university careers services.

Later I have enjoyed the Hallam University Film Studies screenings, and record from Freeview -Talking Pictures TV is a useful channel for older films - and enjoy live cinema, recently *Orwell 2+2=5* directed by Raul Peck, *The Secret Agent* directed by Kleber Medonça Filho and *Hamnet* directed by Chloé Zhao. Like any cultural genre it is interesting to study its development, different genres and styles. Doing so not only enhances appreciation but also gives much enjoyment.

**Michael Miller**

## STEEL CITY CHORISTERS AT HOME IN ST. MARK'S

On behalf of everyone at Steel City Choristers, thank you so much for the warm welcome we have received at St Mark's since Beth invited us to base ourselves with you last September. We are feeling increasingly at home, though aware that we occupy a somewhat liminal space in our belonging.

For most of us, we are at home at St Mark's on our rehearsal days every Monday and Friday in term time, rather than regularly on a Sunday morning. St Mark's is our base, but we also feel a sense of belonging to the wider city, as we seek to serve all sorts of different churches and other communities across Sheffield. So although members of the Sunday morning congregation may not feel they know all that many members of Steel City Choristers personally, and as an organisation we are very outward-looking across the city, there is a strong sense of connection and we are keen to find more opportunities for overlap.

We are delighted about one new overlap - Helena Roulston, St Mark's new Associate Priest, has become the Pastoral Care Lead for the choir. She will be attending our Monday rehearsals regularly as a chaperone, looking out for the children and building relationships with parents. We have a big need for chaperones to accompany every aspect of our work - including our main chorister rehearsals; small group tuition and singing with our Juniors, our Seniors, and our boys with changing voices; as well as our one-to-one singing lessons and youth work. Sometimes it is hard to fill our rota, and this term we had to cancel senior sectionals because we were short of chaperones. So we are very grateful for Helena's regular commitment.

Here are some ideas for how you too could help:

- **Chaperoning** - joining our team of chaperones to help on an occasional or regular basis at our rehearsals or performances
- **Welcoming** - manning the welcome desk at performances, chatting with people and encouraging them to sign up to our newsletter and consider supporting the choir financially
- **Sewing** - mending buttons on cassocks and sewing new amices (the white collars we wear under our cassocks)
- **Recruiting** - inviting children who love singing to come to our Pizza Rehearsal on 6 July
- **Graphic design** - creating posters and other literature
- **Social media** - creating video and photo content for the socials

- **Community fundraising** - holding sponsored activities or organising other activities to raise money for the choir
- **Professional help** - offering pro-bono accountancy, book keeping, legal or other professional services
- Strategic thinking - helping strengthen the governance of the organisation and think about its long term future
- **Advocating** - speaking up for us in the diocese and wider community to help build connections and unlock support both locally and nationally.

Our big news this term is that, as you may know, we are losing our Director of Music, Eleanor Jarvis, as she has secured a place on a Masters in Choral Conducting at the Royal Northern College of Music. We are both sorry to see her go and also excited for what the future holds for her and we hope to stay in touch. We are also really pleased to let you know that we have a new Patron: Christopher Gray, Director of Music at St John's College Cambridge. His appointment helps raise our profile in the choral world. There has been a lot of interest in the Director of Music role from around the country and abroad; interviews and auditions will be held at St Mark's on Monday 15 June. We'll keep you posted and no doubt you will meet the new person soon!



Finally, we'd love you to come and hear us sing - all of our engagements are on our [website calendar](#). You can join in singing with us at a Come & Sing Evensong at St Mark's on Sunday 7 June. Please sign up [here](#), so that we know numbers for preparing music and robes. There will be a bake sale afterwards in aid of our [Firm Foundation campaign](#) that aims to increase regular giving

to enable us to recruit a choir manager. The ability to fund this post is key to our long-term future.

To read more about the workings of the choir please read our [annual report](#) and [sign up for our email newsletter](#). To find out more about getting involved please contact our Chair of Trustees, Kate Caroe, at [kate@steelcitychoristers.org.uk](mailto:kate@steelcitychoristers.org.uk)

**Kate Caroe**

## POPULISM AND DEMOCRACY



Churchill declared that: 'Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.' In our time, democracy is being severely tested by the rise of populism. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries, there were many prophets of doom who argued that universal suffrage would give political power to the wrong people. Edmund Burke feared that 'learning... would be cast into the mire and be trodden under the hoofs of the swinish multitude.' Is democracy

now under unprecedented threat from populism? What is populism? How can it be countered?

These were questions addressed on 12 April by Professor Bruce Edmonds when he spoke about 'Populism and Democracy' at St Mark's as part of our Thinking Faith series. Bruce is Director of the Centre for Policy Modelling in Manchester and led a European research project on populism. He and his wife Kim are also well remembered as former members of St Mark's congregation.

Bruce saw 'populism' as a political strategy in which a charismatic leader appeals directly to the people by-passing traditional political methods and institutions. The existing elite is treated as causing the country's problems. The leader is opportunistic and quick to change policies according to the way the wind blows. When a populist obtains power, he or she is impatient of any constraints on that power, such as the press or the judiciary, and may try to change the rules and undermine democracy in his or her own interest.

Populism is not new. It was prevalent, for example, in the Roman Empire and in earlier phases of American history. Populism has spread in recent years for two reasons. First, memories of the horrors of the Second World War caused by the rise of fascism have now faded. Second, living standards have stagnated since the 2008 financial crisis. There is widespread dissatisfaction and traditional political parties get the blame.

How do populists differ from traditional political parties? They focus on the electorate, whereas traditional parties spend much of their time in internal political argument. For example, Reform avoids much internal argument because it is a private company owned by Nigel Farage. Boris Johnson focused not on party wrangling, but on projecting himself and his ideas and jokes to the electorate. Populists say things (e.g. about racial issues) that seem out of bounds to conventional politicians, but which may appeal to sections of the electorate. Populist leaders can be all important. Berlusconi's political party in Italy disappeared when he was no longer there to lead it.

Populists deliberately encourage polarisation of the electorate by making provocative statements and personal attacks and stoking fear and prejudice. They refuse the politics of compromise and co-operation, which is necessary to make multi-party democracy work.

There is a considerable overlap between nationalism and populism, but they also differ. For nationalists, the enemy is the foreigner, not the elite. Nationalists are less opportunistic- they will always prioritise their country's interest and look back to a golden age of national greatness.

Populist politicians appeal to people who feel that their views (e.g. on race) are sidelined, who feel less well off or who do not like changes. Psychologically, those with an authoritarian personality may be drawn to populism.

How can we combat populism? Bruce made various recommendations:

- Do not argue against the populist's vision but question their ability to deliver it.
- Avoid policies which abruptly take away existing rights e.g. winter fuel allowances. Instead, change policies much more gradually
- Promote alternative visions to those put forward by the populists.
- Ignore deliberate provocations from the populists.
- Focus on the electorate, not on your party.
- Communicate effectively with ordinary people.

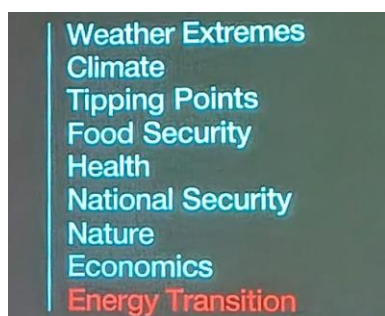
In question time, some of Bruce's points were disputed. For example, some felt that we must directly challenge the false visions put forward by populists e.g. on climate change. Another questioner saw the Green Party's advocacy of water nationalisation as an example of populism. Bruce disagreed – it was just simplistic and all political parties were simplistic at times.

But the best commentary on Bruce's excellent talk came in the news that very evening from Budapest. The Hungarian electorate had brought Victor Orban's 'illiberal democracy' to an abrupt end.

***David Price***

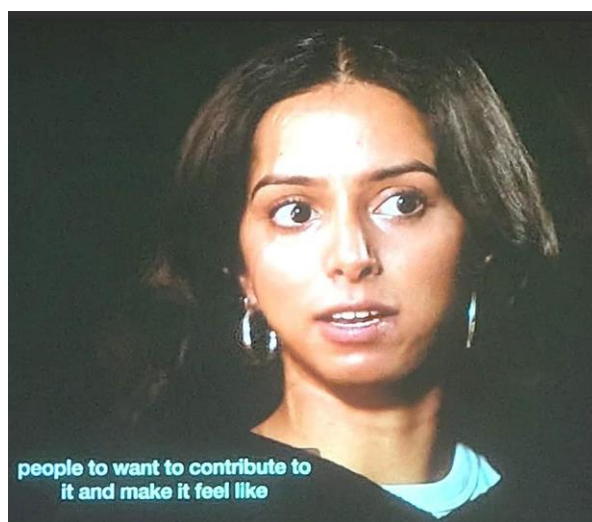
## FILM REVIEW

I attended the screening of the National Emergency Briefing film at St Thomas' Church in Crookes; as a crowdfunder for its production I was interested to see reactions other than at St Mark's. About 100 were in attendance but the church had seating for double that number. I spoke to several of the audience who had come from places such as Wadsley Bridge and Nether Edge, some alerted by the Diocesan News – the environmental officer, Cathy Rhodes, was also there. Predictably those attending had an existing concern about climate change and were informed to some degree, but the message needs to get out to climate ignoramuses and sceptics. Thus, the film includes a plea for each of us to contact our MP asking them to press for a primetime TV screening across all major channels.



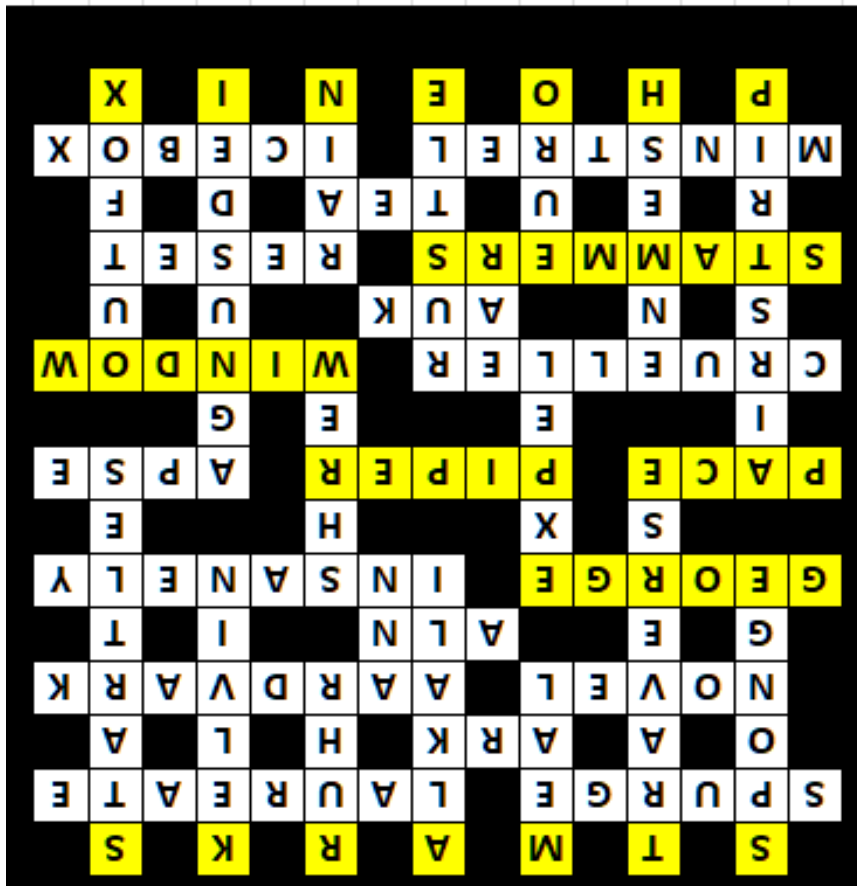
The 45 minute film itself, introduced by Chris Packham, is an edited shortened version of the expert briefings given to MPs. To avoid viewers being swamped by information there are pauses between each topic section in which viewers give reactions to the information. Clearly they learn new things, have misinformation corrected and are often

shocked at the accelerating severity of the effects, grasping that climate change is not something to worry about or take action in the future but needs forceful action now, especially by world governments. But they saw hope when they were appraised of the progress of renewables, how much cheaper they have become and how little of GDP it will cost to work towards net zero, thus saving trillions of pounds (or dollars) of damage, disruption and danger.



**Michael Miller**

Initial letters of clues taken in order spell out:  
 Nineteen sixty-three church reconsecrated.



Crossword by Andrew Sanderson



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