

Go Bananas for Fairtrade

A sermon preached by the Revd. Guy Wilkinson at St Peter's, Wolvercote on Sunday, 22nd February, 2009, for the beginning of Fairtrade Fortnight.

Today we are going bananas. How do we know that bananas are sociable? Because they hang about in bunches.

Our Lord Jesus Christ, a lump of Oxford clay and these bananas, what have they got in common?

I shall try to show that they are connected in profound ways to each other and to each of our lives.

In their very different ways, each speaks to us of the way in which there are layers of reality to everything in creation; that as Jesus constantly encouraged us to do – we must open our eyes if we want to see what is to be seen and our ears if we want to hear what is to be heard.

Jesus himself is and was the perfect illustration of the way in which there is always more to someone or something than meets the eye. To the eyes of those around him, Jesus was 'just' the son of Mary, a local man, the son of a carpenter. To those who have eyes to see, he was and is the Christ, the saviour of the world. It was at the transfiguration that something of this other reality was dazzlingly revealed; but in a thousand ways, for those who look and listen, there was and is always more – the parables were Jesus' way of encouraging us to understand this.

Yesterday I went to the gravel pits near Cassington with my eight year old grandson, Eli. We took our geological hammers with us and then picked up lumps of very ordinary looking blue Oxford clay. To our normal eyesight that is all that they were: lumps of clay, and we could well have tossed them aside. But on breaking them open, a whole other story, a whole other reality was revealed. It was the story of an ancient sea which was present there 145 million years ago. In that sea swam squid like creatures – belemnites – and ammonites; oysters littered the sea floor and sea plants grew and thrived. We found all of these within the ordinary lumps of clay and our eyes were opened to the extraordinary story of God's creation laid bare in a lump of clay in Cassington.

And a banana? Well, I'll come to that in a moment.

First, I want to explore a bit more the ways in which there is more to everything than meets the eye. As Christian people we are obliged to look below the surface appearance of things and to try to see with the eyes of the heart and the eyes of the mind. Nothing is just what it seems and we need constantly to be alert to the temptation to think that things – items in our shopping basket, or the trees, rocks or flowers around us – are *only* things.

Of course we know this to be the case at the physical level. To me this might be just a bunch of bananas or a piece of rock – solid looking and familiar. But to a particle physicist, it is actually a collection of subatomic particles with more spaces than solid parts.

But behind the physical, there are the emotional depths of each and every thing. What we call *things* have meaning and value to us and to others, because of their associations. An old chair, because the beloved mother or father who sat in it; the ring which holds within it the story of our engagement or marriage; the battered teddy which holds a whole childhood.

And beyond the emotional meanings are the spiritual depths of every item – every *thing*.

The fossils we found at Cassington contain the story of God's creation. This bunch of bananas speaks of the spiritual gifts of God in our ability to see colour, to taste sweetness, to know pleasure, to be sustained.

All of this means that everything, even the most ordinary items, have a story to tell, and that it is our responsibility to ask about the story and to listen to it. If we do not do so, we will be blind to the story of God which is the ultimate story of love

This banana, what is its story? To listen to its story, I need five volunteers here with me.

First, this is the grower, the worker who tended the banana and picked it. Perhaps he lives in Ecuador as one of the 250,000 people in that country who get their living by growing bananas for us. He has a name, a wife, children. At this very moment it is six o'clock in the morning in Ecuador and this worker has already said his prayers and is out and working in the plantation – the very person who picked this bunch of bananas only a few weeks ago.

But he does not own the plantation; that is owned by someone else and quite likely the landowner is one of the five companies who own 80% of the £10 billion world wide banana business.

The landowner sells the bananas to the exporter who arranges to have them taken from the plantation to the warehouse for storage until someone buys them in some other part of the world – ours perhaps.

Then the banana, including this actual bunch, are bought by an importing company which brings them across the Atlantic, tended by seafarers, perhaps to Liverpool or London.

The story continues: this bunch of bananas was bought by one of our supermarkets – Tesco or Sainsbury or Asda, and displayed for sale at about 90p per bunch. That was where Tessa bought it yesterday.

Who gets what share of that 90p? Well, the equivalent of four bananas goes to Sainsbury; two bananas go to the importer; one banana goes to the exporter; 1 3/4 bananas go to the landowner. And to the person who tended and picked the banana and whose wages we paid in the price of the banana? He gets just one quarter of one banana.

That is part of the story of this bunch of bananas. It is no longer just a banana, but much more if we have eyes to see and ears to hear.

It is a gift of God in creation; it is a symbol of the ways in which so many people act for better or for worse – it is a symbol of justice or injustice; its is a challenge to us: what has been called the Micah challenge – from the prophet Micah whom we read earlier: What does the Lord require of us? To act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God”.

The challenges which the bananas give to us are these:

Nothing is just what it seems: can we open our eyes and ears to see and hear the stories?

By our decisions in the shops we can decide to do or not to do what the Lord requires: to act justly or unjustly. By buying a Fairtrade banana we might be able to transform the lives of the workers in Ecuador, and their families and the world. Buying Fairtrade banana increases their income by about four times