



COWLEY
ST JOHN
MAGAZINE

DECEMBER 2020

St John of the Cross -Prison Canticle

by Phil Ritchie

There's a lovely book called *The Impact of God* which talks about John of the cross' time in prison when he is asking himself who Jesus Christ really is for him. One of the first things that is emphasised is that Jesus is part of a 'universe of generosity' called the Trinity. In the Trinity we find a Father and a Son who are 'amazed at each other' but we also meet the Christ who - seeking always to include and draw others into the circle of love - is willing to go out and live in the midst of a broken creation.

For John of the Cross there is a stress, in the incarnation, of God in Christ just being with us - eating, drinking, talking, sharing. We talk a lot in the Church about the ministry of just being present but we sometimes downplay the importance of this.

It's been something which has really tugged at our heart stings during the pandemic and also been a focus for anxiety around our Christmas plans; will we really be able to arrange to be with those special and vulnerable friends and members of our family over Christmas? I was hearing from a woman in her 90s recently who actually said the war hadn't been as bad because at least she could hug her friends and neighbours.





Maybe one of the things we have learned in these past months is the absolute tear-jerking joy of being with another person, and we have almost remembered this truth because of its absence for so long. When we meet new people we are often anxious to make a good impression but we forget the power of just being present to another person, not even talk or touch or sight but physical presence.

This is the answer to who Jesus is to John, Jesus is present with us, and in being present with us offers us this amazing invitation to live in the love of the community of the Trinity ourselves. Jesus is present with us and the energy of that encounter is life giving. Advent always calls us to a recollection, a remembering.

This Christmas all of us could ask who Jesus is for us and the answer we will no doubt find is that Jesus is with us, not in some mysterious high brow spiritual way but in the midst of our pains, our insecurities, and our failings calling us to a new life of love and hope.

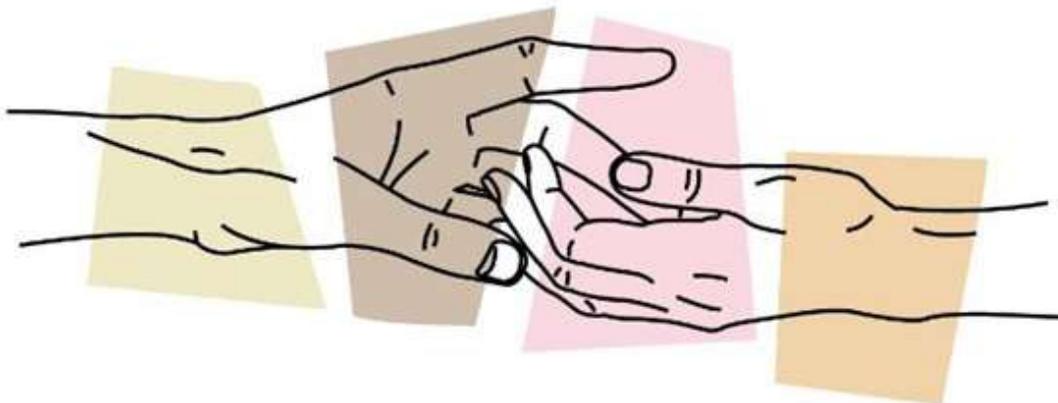
Oxford Mutual Aid

by Felix Levay

Oxford Mutual Aid was founded during the initial Covid-19 crisis and has since become one of the largest providers of emergency support for at-risk people in Oxford. The pandemic, lockdown, and consequent recession have made it much harder for people to access support at the same time as more and more people are struggling to make ends meet.

We are committed to practical solidarity: neighbours helping one another to protect the most vulnerable people in their communities. Our focus is providing support to those who, for whatever reason, are unable to access support through other means. People are referred to us by GPs, social workers, and other community groups.

Oxford Mutual Aid



07310 160 595



oxfordmutualaid.org



[@oxfordmutualaid](https://twitter.com/oxfordmutualaid)

OMA currently operates out of the Richard Benson Hall, which Cowley St. John Parish kindly allows us to rent. Using the hall as our base of operations, we prepare and distribute food and supply parcels, reheatable meals, and baby supply parcels. We also provide ad hoc support to other local volunteer groups. For example, we often donate food or sanitary supplies to local homeless organisations.

In October, we provided weekly food and supply support for 182 households. Through our Kitchen Collective programme, we are additionally providing 150 households with regular reheatable meals. We also provided 98 emergency food parcels in October, and we are currently providing special support for 38 households with expectant and new mothers.

We are very pleased to be working with Parish in this difficult time, especially as many of the people we help are located in the Cowley area. The Winter months will be challenging for all of us, but together we can continue to keep one another as safe as possible.



Responding to our Eco Crisis

by Janet McCrae

‘Think and Do’: Workshops on Environmental Action

The series of talks was set up by Gaby Hock to promote discussion in the community of the ecological crisis, and to raise awareness and inspire local action on the climate emergency. The sessions summarised below were held via Zoom, rather than at SMJ as originally planned.

Insight into the climate crisis

The first talk, in April 2020, was presented by Linda Aspey, Extinction Rebellion activist, who reminded us of the damage we are doing to the natural world and the consequences such as global heating, and resulting climate change, that are going to affect the lives of everyone around the world.

“Why,” she asked, “isn’t this a more urgent issue in the media?”, emphasising its complexity and the fact that politicians believe environmental issues are unpopular with the electorate and are reluctant to prioritize them. There is widespread frustration that, while the earth’s temperature has risen by 1.1 degrees, the government has scrapped zero carbon homes, cut solar power subsidies, approved the Heathrow extension, and more – at the same time, promising to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2050.

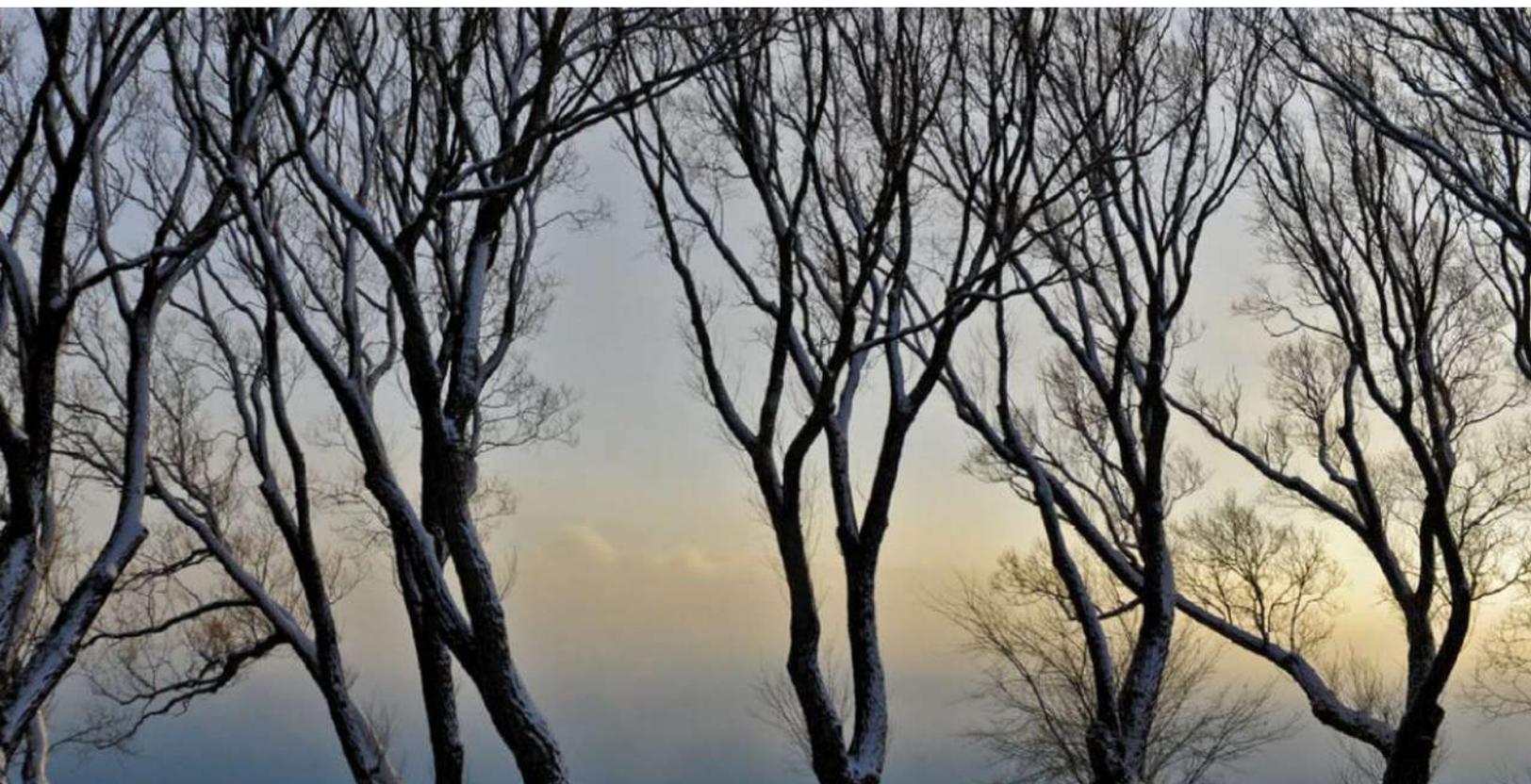
What the pandemic has now shown, is that government can respond quickly when necessary, and air quality did improve as people used their cars less.

There are some parallels between Covid 19 and the environmental damage caused by global heating:

- like climate change, the virus affects us all, rich and poor; we are all vulnerable to floods, droughts and fires;
- the pandemic has shown that listening to scientific advice and acting swiftly can prevent deaths;
- government steps in when necessary, paying wages when work is not possible, and subsidizing industry; this approach to policy making could be effective in achieving carbon emission targets too.

How we feel about climate change, and what we can do about it?

The second talk was by Jo Hamilton, scientific researcher and activist, who focused on climate change and our emotions – how we usually operate, by first thinking, then acting, leaving little space for emotional factors in the process. She touched on the feelings of grief for ‘eco-cide – the death of eco-systems – and the fear of consequences which we feel powerless to alter which can lead to inertia or even depression.



How we really can make a difference

In the third talk Chris Church from Friends of the Earth gave us an upbeat message, on what we can achieve as individuals, emphasising that much has been achieved already, just nothing like enough yet! Some participants responded that the key to significant change was a radical shift in our thinking – away from consumerism and growth, to a new economic model, and a more forceful requirement that government move decisively and faster toward a more just and equitable society. (see the article in the previous Parish Magazine).

The climate emergency and spiritual wisdom

The fourth presentation was by Rev. Margot Hodson, a church minister in Oxfordshire and Director of Theology and Education at the John Ray Initiative (<https://www.jri.org.uk>). Margot explored spiritual wisdom for the environment, citing biblical Christian sources, other world faiths, and non-religious traditions.

Some have claimed that the roots of the ecological crisis are to be found in biblical texts such as Gen. 1:27b: ‘let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground’. Words in some translations such as ‘have dominion over...’ have been interpreted not as ‘take responsibility for...’ but as ‘exploit...’.

A better interpretation would have made clear that all things created by God are ‘good’ (Gen 1:17); though humans are created in God’s image, in some ways distinct from the rest of creation, we are an integral part of nature; humans have been given the duty of responsible stewardship of the earth; our task is to interact with nature – protect the natural cycles of our eco-system, and enable it to evolve, adapt and be fruitful.



Other passages from Old and New Testaments, and the teachings of other religions, put a more positive slant on the three-way relationship between God, humankind and the rest of the natural world. Among many possible examples Margot cited the book of Deuteronomy, dealing with the Sabbath principal of periodic respite for people, animals, and the land.

Modern society has lost sight of this important concept, and we are exhausting the natural world and ourselves with it. When you lay siege to a city for a long time, fighting against it to capture it, do not destroy its trees by putting an axe to them, because you can eat their fruit. Do not cut them down. Are the trees of the field people, that you should besiege them?(Deuteronomy 20:19).

Hebrew ethical teaching emphasises ‘a modest lifestyle’ and avoiding over-consumption. Islamic teaching includes the rejection of lending with interest. The major world faiths refer to the relationship between God and the created world or universe, and insist on the need to care responsibly for it.

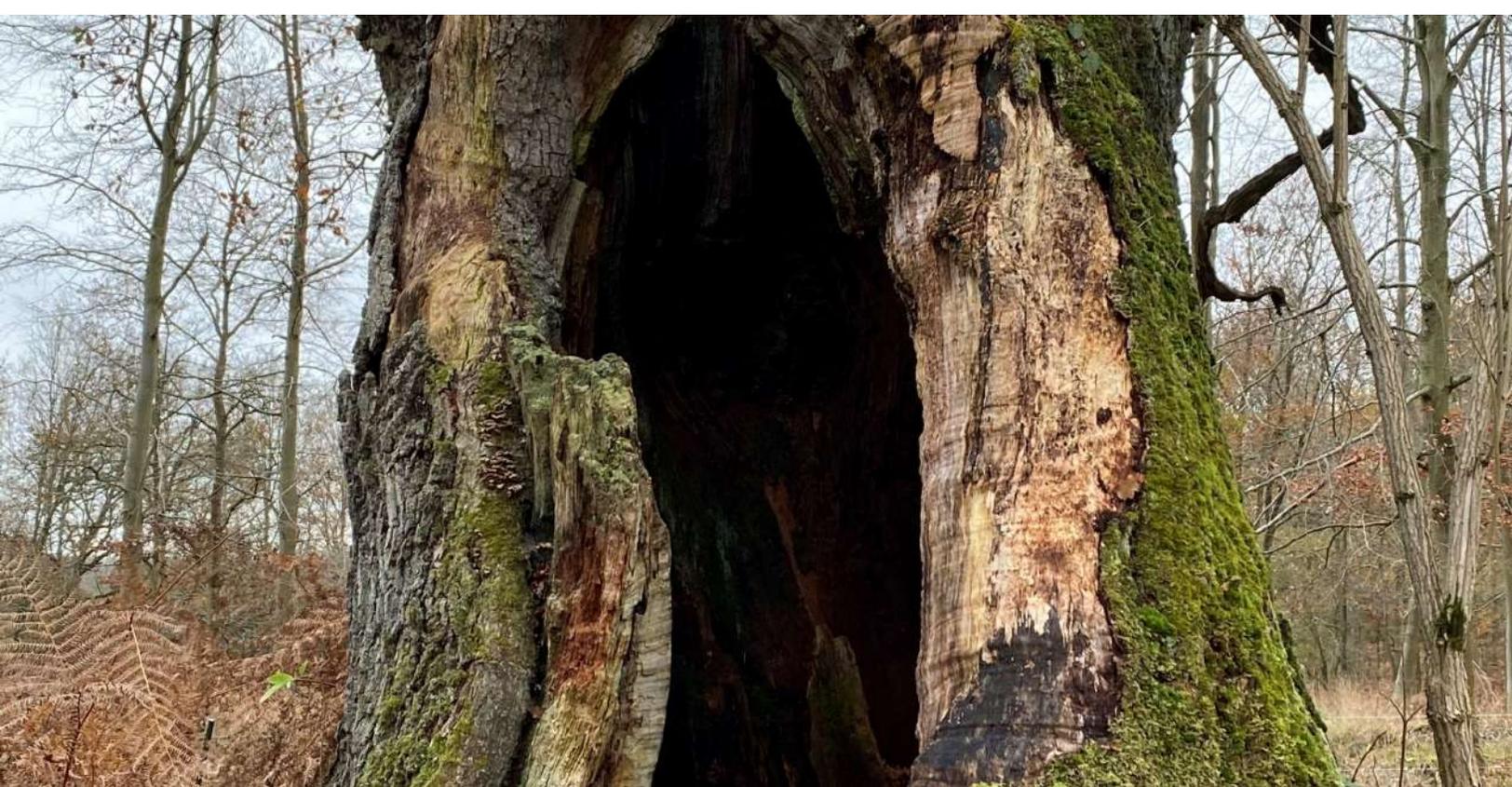


The need for a new story on climate change

The fifth session in the series featured a video recording of Charles Eisenstein, a humanitarian, activist and author, who stressed that the planetary crisis facing us today can only be met by a revolutionary transformation of our society, going way beyond just cutting Co2 emissions. It requires a shift of thinking, towards an integral world-view that recognizes our earth as a living biosphere in which all life is bound together and interdependent, and rooted in a sense of the sacred. Eisenstein touched on some changes in attitude to nature that are already taking place. Change can start at local level. Those participating shared what they thought their individual role or gift might be.

Looking to the future

The next step would be for a group of us to meet to enable some of these ideas to be put into practice in our local community. If you share our concerns on environmental issues and would like to be involved, please contact Claire Browes curatecsj@gmail.com.



The Story of Central High School Kabale

by Sunday John, edited by
Daniel Emlyn-Jones

I am not very good at giving money to charity (it often goes on other things first), but I'm always happy to give my time and energy to projects which help people. The first coronavirus lockdown freed up some time, which made this much easier.

Recently I edited a book, now self published on Amazon.co.uk, entitled 'The Story of Central High School Kabale'. This school, founded and headed by a man called Sunday John, who is the author of the book, offers an education to the very poor in rural Uganda and champions girls' education. Sunday John himself grew up in extreme poverty and had to fight for his schooling. This book has stories from Sunday John, UK teacher Annette Alcock who has known him for years, Sally and Nick Archer who sponsored Sunday's education and help support the school, and students of the school. It is a moving and gripping read, with important insights into how a small-scale charitable endeavour such as this can work.

We had quite a few Zoom conferences to Uganda during its writing, where the cost of Zooming is 3000 Ugandan Shillings per hour. It sounds like a lot, but is actually about 1 USD!

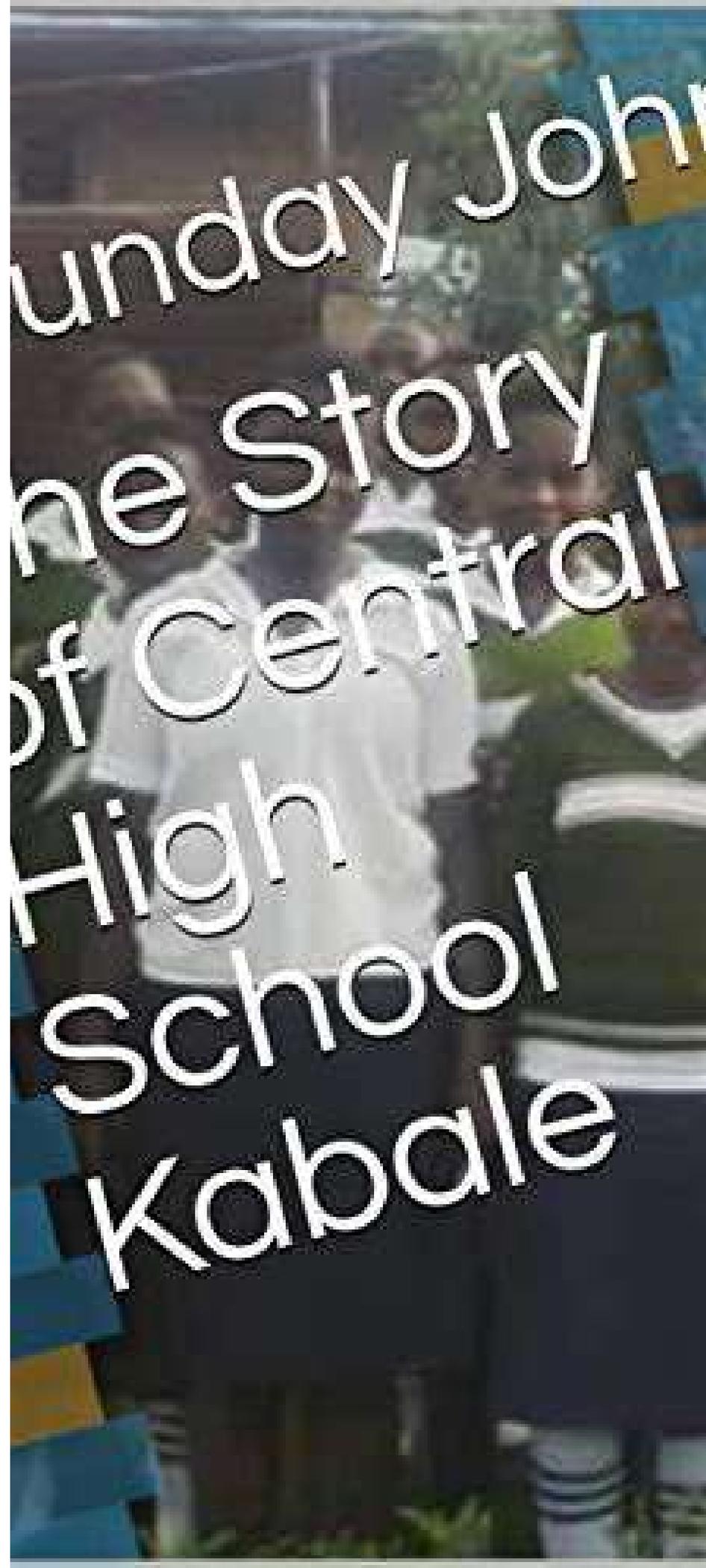
The book has a foreword by parish member Prof. John Hammock, who is also the Co-founder and Research Associate of the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, University of Oxford.

Thanks to John's networks, we secured a very generous 1,500 USD grant from the Episcopalians for Global Reconciliation (EGR), not to mention donations and ideas from other generous people.

Sadly, the world of charitable endeavour is littered with scams.

'African School needs money' so often gives rise to a very understandable knee jerk reaction of 'it's a scam'. Some of these scams unfortunately can be quite sophisticated. This book tells the tale of how a small scale charitable endeavour, with a team of wise people who have known each other for years and who trust each other, can minimise these risks, and can work to change lives and communities.

The paperback is only £3, so do get your copy! All proceeds and donations go to the school of course.



A Church's Reaction to the Global Ecological Crisis

by Michael Barrett

The urgent need for a radical new agenda on the environment was dramatically spelled out to the world's billion or so Catholics by pope Francis in his 2015 Laudatosi document (a). Now a follow-up publication has been released by the Vatican, not yet available in print in English but accessible on the web, see the link below (b).

The new book, *Journeying Towards Care for our Common Home*, (c)sets out in some 200 pages a range of practical courses of action, and is intended as a guide to inspire “decisions and actions that can help us look to the future with confidence and hope”. The book presents a variety of “operational proposals for action on the part of church institutions, believers and all people of good will.”

In the first part the book deals with technical, economic and financial practicalities, with a dozen sections making specific proposals related to ‘Education and Ecological Conversion’. The second part deals with ethical, social and educational considerations, with a further twelve proposals related to ‘Integral Ecology and Integral Human Development’; the meanings of somewhat unfamiliar terms such as ‘ecological conversion’ and ‘integral ecology’ become clear when taken in context.

In a final concluding chapter the aim of the book is summarised as follows: “to reaffirm the centrality of integral ecology in the lives of each of us and to help find concrete ways to put it into practice, starting with ourselves but above all from the need to care for our common home and those who inhabit it, especially the most disadvantaged and vulnerable”.



At a practical level the document calls on the church to set an example, through initiatives at parish, school and college level, in areas such as education and training in integral ecology, care for green spaces, ethical investment, energy efficiency, waste management, and a number of other ways in which it can make a significant contribution, such as the annual (1st September) green-themed “World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation”.

The book makes clear that the church’s social doctrine indicates “the urgent need to convert the model of global development... with a new paradigm of development based on prudence and precaution, on concern for the poor and for future generations, on a modification of lifestyles and of consumption...and on a strengthening of the covenant between human beings and the environment”.

Recognizing that there is no single solution to the question of how humanity should respond to the ecological crisis, the book can be summarised as a powerful reminder that there is one particular step we can all take, given the fact that every individual has a responsibility to protect our common home: “to answer the call to ecological conversion, which demands a change in the way we live.” The environment is merely on loan to us, and must be handed on to the next generation. Sustainable development and intergenerational solidarity are a necessity not an option, a fundamental matter of social and environmental justice.





By all accounts this will be an important book to look out for. Meanwhile, the English text can already be accessed on the internet via the link below. Note that on the website four languages are offered, so to view the English version, click on the option "LINGUA INGLESE".

(a) The title refers to a prayer to the glory of creation attributed to saint Francis (b.1181), arguably the world's first 'eco-theologian'.

(b)

<https://www.pcinterreligious.org/journeying-towards-care-for-our-comm>

(c) Journeying Towards Care for Our Common Home: Five Years after Laudato Si; The Working Group of the Holy See on Integral Ecology, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020, ISBN 978-88-266-0464-0.

Report on the Churchyard

by Janet McCrae

In the churchyard

To meet national restrictions during lockdown the churchyard maintenance team of volunteers have been working in pairs, on different days, and with the Wednesday working times staggered. There are still between eight and eleven volunteers working each week, and we are grateful for two additional members from the congregation who have joined us recently. Perhaps surprisingly, there are always jobs to be done in the winter months – taking out brambles and tree seedlings, maintaining paths and sight lines, planting in some of the graves, strimming rough grass areas, maintaining war graves and sweeping up fallen leaves for composting. This year we have made a special effort to plant hundreds more bulbs to make the spring display even more impressive.

The churchyard action group (FOCAG) have been able to meet monthly since August to explore possible activities and events in the churchyard, and ensure security while the lockdown is in place. There has been a great deal of discussion and work on plans for improving security in the churchyard, and now proposals await wider comment before seeking City Council and Diocesan planning approval. Hilary Caldicott who has been our very capable chair-person for over a year stood down in September, and Ruth Ashcroft (the lead on managing the churchyard as a conservation site) agreed to take on the chair role, and Frances Caroe has joined the committee.

Ideas for next year

Frances has proposed setting up a pilot project in the spring to grow a small patch of vegetables and flowers in the churchyard, involving some of the people who attend the Porch and some who frequent the churchyard regularly.

We have also explored the possibility of having bee-hives in the churchyard and sought advice from a local bee keeper and the Oxford Bee Keepers Association.

Unfortunately, we have had to abandon the idea on safety grounds because of the proximity to Helen House, but also because hive bees would compete for nectar resources with our existing population of some 50 or so species of wild bees.

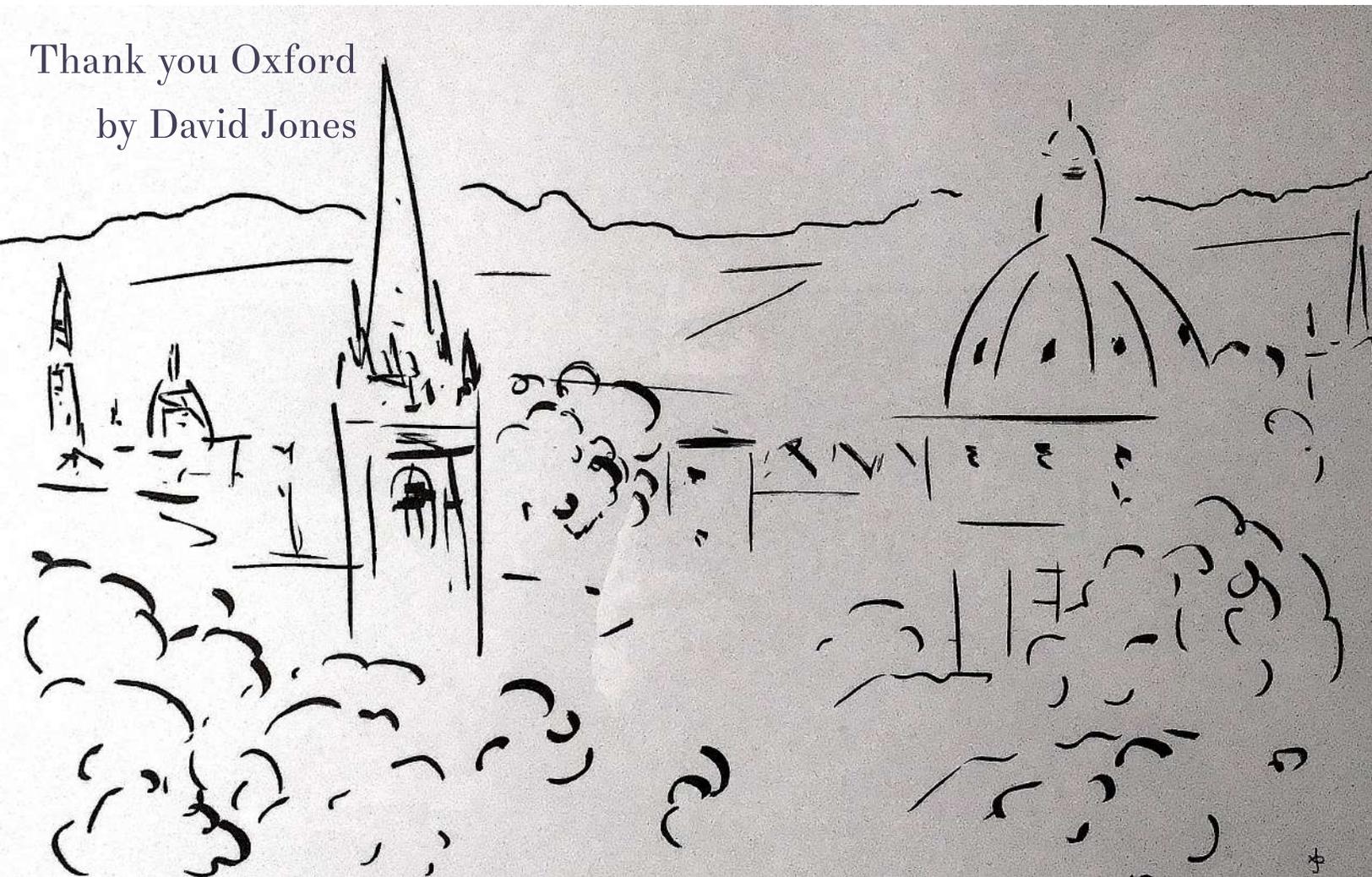


Recent events

A few planned events involving small groups have been possible. Happily, the Seasonal Meditations in the Churchyard, led by Fr.Phil and Gaby, took place as planned, and an additional session is planned for 18 December subject to restrictions on meeting.

Two Geology of Gravestone walks, led by Nina Morgan, took place, having arranged smaller than normal groups through online booking, in connection with September's Open Doors, and the Oxford Innovation Festival; and on 16 October, despite the bad weather, Pop-up Art attracted many more people this year. Thanks and congratulations to all involved, and we look forward to planning more events for 2021.

Thank you Oxford
by David Jones





Prayer by Mrs Adams

Dear God,

Thank you for sending Jesus who loves us so dearly

and gave his life for us

Please forgive us all our sins

and help us to please you

From now on, in Jesus name,

For God has not given us

A Spirit of fear, he has given us a spirit of power and love and a sound mind, in Jesus name

Amen.



