

Week Four - By the Sea.

For the next session, please find a picture or object which demonstrates what 'being by the sea' means for you. It may be a holiday beach, a storm with crashing waves, a shipyard, a harbour or a fishing village. Whatever it is, take it to this week's session as a focus for prayer/discussion.

This week's meditations:

1 - Abundance.

'The clouds sweep north across the subcontinent, enveloping the land in curtains of rain and bringing relief to a parched and overheated soil. . . The rain swells rivers, floods low-lying land, fills reservoirs and irrigation canals, turns deserts green and brings crops to life. The water percolates through soils to fill the pores in rocks beneath.'

(Fred Pearce in Mark Edwards, 2006. *Hard Rain, Still Pictures*. Moving Words Ltd, p.118)

This is a description of the arrival of the monsoon in India, an annual event which revives the land. It reminds us of the reality of life closer to the sun, whether in India or first-century Palestine. There, the desert dominates the landscape; drought is a real danger and famine a frequent historical occurrence, as stories from Old Testament show.

So a freshwater lake such as the Sea of Galilee is a giant oasis. Around 13 miles long and 8 miles wide, its waters are fed by the river Jordan and replenished by the spring floods. On its fertile shores in Jesus' time there were wooded hills and vineyards, palm trees and olive groves. The lake provided fresh water to drink, abundant fish for food and trade, irrigation for crops and pasture for livestock.

Both then and now, the waters of Galilee were a life-sustaining and precious resource for the people of the surrounding countryside: today, many of Israel's centres of population depend on supplies from the lake, as do parts of Jordan and Syria.

In your prayers today, give thanks for the wealth of natural resources which are provided by our fertile planet.

Generous Creator, thank you for our abundant riches: for our flowing rivers, teeming oceans, life-giving forests, sprouting crops, multiplying creatures.

Thank you for the little jewels: the long-awaited buds and the green shoots springing in our gardens.

Thank you for those treasures closest to us: the new life leaping in the womb; the children growing like sunflowers.

Make us careful stewards of this our natural wealth, and show us how to guard and safely increase it for future generations. Amen.

2. Livelihood.

‘As evening came down they hauled in the nets. Into the belly of the boat tumbled ling and launces, scad, hake and fairmaids; enough fish for a whole cauldron of morgy-broth; enough pilchards for half a hundred star-gazy pies..... “We are all saved,” said old Tom, “If we can but bring this haul home to harbour.” ‘

(From *The Mousehole Cat* by Antonia Barber. Walker Books 1990)

On 23 December each year, the Cornish fishing village of Mousehole celebrates Tom Bawcock’s Eve in memory of an old fisherman who, the story goes, saved the village from starvation one wild winter long ago. The seas had been so rough that none of the local fishermen had been able to put to sea for months; with no fish to sell and with stocks of pickled and salted fish almost gone, the situation seemed desperate. Tom Bawcock determined that he would go out into the teeth of the storm which was raging around Land’s End and would not come back empty-handed. When the villagers realised his boat had gone from the harbour, they lit lanterns in their windows and stood on the harbour wall with lights to guide him safely home. He returned triumphant, with a boat full of seven different types of fish, and the village feasted at Christmas. It is said that the dish called star-gazy pie, made with whole pilchards poking their heads through a pastry crust, was created in honour of Tom Bawcock’s life-saving catch.

This story takes us back to a time when Cornwall’s fishing industry was the lifeblood of its coastal towns and villages. Men made their living from the sea: they fished to feed their families and to supply inland areas

with fresh fish – a trade which survived into modern times with the help of the railways. It all seems very distant now, in these days of mechanised trawlers, cheap imports and heavy restrictions imposed on fishermen because of dwindling fish stocks.

The way of life we glimpse in that story is an ancient one, which has much in common with life on the shores of the Sea of Galilee in Jesus' time. Fishing was a thriving business: freshly caught fish was pickled in the coastal towns and exported via the many trade routes which ran through the province. At least four of Jesus' disciples were local fishermen; three came from Bethsaida, whose name means 'place of nets'.

When he called them away from their fishing, he called ordinary working men away from a major local industry.

In a time of quiet, read and reflect on the miracles which Jesus performed by the sea, for example in Luke 5:1–11 and John 21:1–14. Filling nets with fish was no empty gesture: Jesus was helping to make these men's jobs easier and more profitable by providing them with a week's catch all at once.

In these miracles, we see at work the God who meets us where we are, when we are up to our elbows in everyday tasks; the God who gets involved with the demands of our working lives. By the sea, as at the wedding at Cana and in the feeding of the five thousand, we see the God of plenty who provides abundantly for those who are in need.



3.Unpredictability.

The Sea of Galilee, also known as Lake Kinneret, Lake Tiberias and the Sea of Gennesaret, is thirteen miles long and eight miles wide. We may imagine it as a serene body of water, calmly reflecting the hills around it like a picture- postcard view of the Lake District. However, it is known for its sudden, violent storms which are caused by winds funnelling down the Jordan Rift Valley in which it lies.

Just as in Mousehole long ago, this way of life could be harsh and uncertain. The fishermen risked their lives whenever they put out onto the lake, because storms could blow in without warning, and if the nets came up empty again and again, they faced hard times. Their livelihoods were only as secure as their last catch.

Those who live near the coast today are used to making plans which are contingent upon changing tides and fickle weather. However, there is a growing awareness that wherever we live, our existence is 'coastal' in that all our lives intersect with our natural environment, and we are all touched by nature's force.

In a time of quiet today, consider the ways in which your life is touched by nature. Give thanks for the gardens, parks and wild places which you enjoy; reflect, too, on any unusual changes in your natural environment which you have noticed. Take the time today to pay attention to strange events like this, and hold your observations in prayer:

Please also remember those whose lives have been destroyed by nature's unpredictable violence, and those who struggle to survive in the aftermath.

Pray for those known to you who have been affected by a natural disaster; pray for those we have forgotten, and those known only to God.

Material adapted from 'Encountered: Meeting God in Everyday Places' by Claire Benton Evans and published by Kevin Mayhew in 2009.