

**Sermon by Bp. David Walker, Episcopal Visitor
Dispersal Address, Society of Ordained Scientists
Online Gathering, Summer 2021**

Yesterday afternoon, in a slot that sadly overlapped with the start of the second of our sessions that day, I spoke in the UK House of Lords, as part of the legislative process which will lead to a new Environment Act being placed on the statute books. The particular debate I was taking part in, was concerned with plans to require a minimum 10% net gain in biodiversity from planning developments. I had two minutes to link from the theology of creation through examples of how churches are practically promoting biodiversity, not least in churchyards, to end by urging members to amend the Bill to ensure commitments to net gain are adequately funded and not time limited. There's little point agreeing to a thirty-year biodiversity plan with a landowner, if they can then plough it up and destroy it in year 31.

In both preparing and delivering my speech, I felt the strength of this Society behind me. If this is true for me, who am simply your Visitor, how much more can it be true for the members.

The worship sessions we have shared over these last few days play a vital part in assuring me that God is with us in our care for creation. The Meditations we have heard, have opened my mind even further to see the wonders of life on Earth and strengthened my resolve. When Pan spoke of the catastrophic events that have occurred in the history of this planet, it reminded me that life is both extraordinarily precarious and amazingly resilient. To live on a planet whose age is measured in billions of years, and bears the scars of those ages, is a far more miraculous and awe-inspiring truth than the 6025 or so years that Bishop Graham Usher reminded us his late namesake's calculations would have it now be. I was sorry to miss most of Roger's presentation last night, which I know from colleagues was equally inspirational. And indeed to be detained, literally at Her Majesty's Pleasure this morning, when conversation continued. Jared's meditation this afternoon helped me get more of a sense of how important is the work that my epigeneticist daughter and her research colleagues at Exeter University do.

Our plenaries and breakout groups have allowed us to explore the ideas presented to us in greater depth. For me at least, it is that close conversation with a handful of colleagues and friends which turns data into understanding, allows me to test my views in a safe and supportive place. whilst, in common with most bishops, I do a lot of talking, I also get talked at quite a lot. And no matter how well presented the arguments, I don't find I've properly processed them until I've taken part in some sort of conversation that tests my understanding.

Like many of us, I've relished the fact that holding our Gathering online has allowed an ease of participation from members in many time zones. We have saved on costs of time and travel. But we have missed that particular dimension of human engagement that comes from meeting face to face. Some months ago, I compounded the quip, "God so loved the world that he didn't send a Zoom invitation". The doctrine of the Incarnation places on Christians, even more than anyone else, a priority to be physically present with one another. To attend to each other at a depth not possible from behind a screen. We above all should be hugely grateful for the science and technology that makes virtual conferencing on this scale available to an extent that less than a decade ago would have been hard to imagine. Like many other bodies, we now need to think hard about how we can blend virtual and physical gatherings together in ways that maximise participation, especially for a community as widely dispersed as SOSc. But I very much hope many of us are able to gather physically next year, in the USA in January and the UK in summer.

Meanwhile, in a few minutes time, our 2021 Gathering will be over, we will press the Leave button on our screens one final time, and return to the demands of our regular labours and routines. Yet we will do so carrying the Society and its members invisibly with us. The events of this week will colour our engagements over the time to come.

For my part, when I go into a debating chamber, especially one as demanding as parliament, and I intend to speak to a further series of amendments on forestry on Monday, I sense myself clothed

with the support of this Society. I know that my concerns for faith and science are not some isolated peculiarity of my own. For me that makes all the difference. Whatever your own equivalent context may be, as you journey back and forward exploring both science and faith, I pray that it may do so for you. May God go with you.