



Reflection for beach cleanup

Take a moment to prepare your heart and mind for the work your hands are going to carry out. Allow Miranda Harris, co-founder of A ROCHA, to guide you through her story and into God's word.

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Since childhood I have been utterly captivated by the sea. My earliest recorded sentence occurred after beholding this wonder for the first time – “Can I get in it?” In fact, it was probably my first response of worship to the Creator. Many of the psalms tell us that the primary purpose of the non-human creation too is to 'declare the glory of God' (Psalm 19:1), to 'proclaim the work of his hands', so perhaps it is not surprising that a small child should want to join in! The ocean both stirs and stills me more than anything else in creation.

Over 70% of the surface of the earth is covered by the ocean. So what are we, as children of the Creator, to make of the fact that an estimated 8 million tonnes of plastic enters this vast body of water every year? Some research even suggests that by 2050 there may be more plastic than fish in the sea.

For many years it has been my practice to make an annual four-day retreat, always within walking distance of the sea. I have learned to expect the Lord to speak to me, usually through the beauty of the world he has made. Recently, however, I reached the afternoon of the last day, without having heard anything specific, despite being immersed in the breathtaking loveliness of spring for several days. Eventually, feeling despondent and discouraged, I found myself on the edge of a small beach. As my eyes rested on the scene for a few moments, I realised something was wrong. Its surface was dotted with unnatural colour, and strewn with objects that didn't belong. Suddenly I understood what I was supposed to hear: “Clean my beach”. Builders working nearby lent me a bucket, and I made a start. An hour and several buckets of plastic later, I had made very little impact.

But there was more to learn. Some of the plastic was big, bright and easy to identify. Other pieces were tiny, or thin and long, hard to see, and often attached to other objects below the surface, so a small action became a bigger, more thorough one. And there were pieces of plastic, usually green or orange strings that were entwined with living organisms like seaweed; these took more time and patience to disentangle.

A bit like sin, I thought...

Then I noticed that no matter how hard I worked, more pieces of plastic were being carried on to the shingle by the stream tumbling down the hillside. And every wave that thudded onto the beach, dragged itself back out to sea after dumping its unwelcome cargo. To my horror, a little way out in the bay, a gull was sitting on its own plastic mattress, as if on a small, bobbing, multi-coloured island. The worst part was beginning to realise my own complicity in the catastrophic proliferation of plastic.





Clearly this job of cleaning beaches is too big for mere people. And certainly we are more in need of forgiveness, both personally, and on behalf of humankind, than is comfortable to admit. I was learning there are things we can do, and things only God can do. Like forgiving. By now I had a lot to think about.

So in all our efforts, we need to remember that this is God's world, which we get to live in with all our fellow creatures. We only ever work alongside him.

Let's turn to God's word to look for ways we can do that well.

PSALM 77

If possible, read the whole psalm. Then verses 13 and 14, two or three times.

"Your ways O God are holy.
What God is as great as our God?
You are the God who performs miracles;
You display your power among the peoples."

The Psalmist is writing from a place of great distress, almost of despair. But even in his anguish he knows who he can turn to. No-one doubts that the world's oceans are in terrible trouble, and many of those who care are experiencing great distress too. That is perhaps why you are here today. The Psalmist brings his troubles to the only one powerful enough to handle them, and in so doing, invites us to do the same.

In verses 10–12 he gives us three suggestions:

- remember miracles he has done in the past
- meditate on all he has made (his works)
- consider all his mighty deeds.

As you work to clean up beaches today, try to put these instructions into practice. Afterwards, write down any insights you received, and notice any changes they make to how you feel about the task.

I believe God loves our efforts to clean the ocean, and clear the cluttered beaches. He receives it as our worship and our obedience, and in doing it as such, we learn more about him, his world, and ourselves. But the only way to stay hopeful and faith-full in this daunting task is to reflect on the character of God himself.

Ultimately it is he who will renew all of creation.

"The sea is his, and he made it" (Psalm 95:5)
– and it WILL shine out his glory once again! ”

