



Link

May 2026

The Magazine of the United Reformed Church
Stratford-upon-Avon



Worship, Witness and love for others through Jesus Christ

**The United Reformed Church
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Stratford-upon-Avon**

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Thoughts for the Month

When Words Outstay Their Welcome (Rethinking Language in Modern Christianity)

There is a particular kind of beauty in the language of older theology and hymnody. The soaring phrases, the poetry, the sense of reverence carried in every line—these have shaped generations of worshippers. Those of us brought up in the church since our younger days are very familiar with the language used. Yet, for many today, especially those new to church life, that same language can feel distant, opaque, or simply unintelligible. Our own grandchildren, for example are bemused by the language we use and ask questions as to its meaning. The question is not whether tradition has value - it clearly does - but whether some of our inherited words have quietly become redundant in communicating the gospel, in portraying Jesus as relevant.

Take, for example, the hymns of the 18th and 19th centuries. Writers such as Isaac Watts and Charles & John Wesley crafted texts of remarkable theological depth. Their hymns were rich in scriptural allusion and doctrinal precision. One of our visiting preachers in the past, Roger Hall, often told us that there is so much theology in hymns. Yet they were also written in the language of their time - a language that assumed familiarity with certain metaphors, social structures, and religious concepts that are no longer widely understood, today.



Words like "thee," "thou," and "thy" are perhaps the most obvious examples. Once part of everyday speech, they now signal formality or antiquity. While some find them reverent, others find them alienating. More significantly, theological terms such as "propitiation," "justification," or "effulgence" may once have been part of common religious vocabulary but nowadays require explanation. When such words are sung or recited without understanding, they risk becoming empty sounds -

rituals without meaning.

This is what we might call redundant language: not incorrect, not without value, but no longer effective in conveying its intended message. It is language that has lost its communicative power, even if it retains aesthetic or historical significance.



Consider the line from a well-known hymn: "Here I raise mine Ebenezer". This is a line from the 2nd verse of the 18th century hymnwriter Robert Robinson: "Come thou fount of every blessing". It refers to 1 Samuel 7:12, where the prophet Samuel sets up a stone to mark God's help, naming it "Ebenezer" or "stone of help". It symbolizes a

reminder of gratitude for divine assistance. For those unfamiliar with the biblical reference in 1 Samuel, the phrase can be baffling. Without context, "Ebenezer" might evoke Dickens rather than devotion. The original meaning - a stone of help, a marker of God's faithfulness is profound, but it is not immediately obvious or accessible.

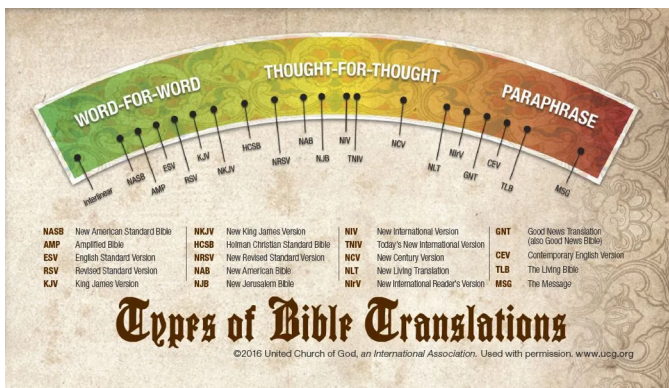
This raises an important pastoral question: what is the purpose of our language in worship? If it is to glorify God and build up the congregation, then clarity must surely be part of that calling. Language that obscures rather than reveals may inadvertently create barriers to engagement, particularly for younger generations or those exploring faith for the first time. We have to ask ourselves: "Are we putting off potential followers / Christians by what we say?"

None of this is to suggest that we should discard our heritage. The hymns of many of the 18th and 19th century writers, and others, remain treasures of the Church. Their theological richness and poetic craft continue to inspire. But perhaps we need to approach them with a renewed sense of responsibility - to interpret, to explain, and where appropriate, to translate.

Some churches have begun to address this by offering modern paraphrases of older hymns, or by providing brief explanations before singing. The relatively new Methodist hymnbook 'Singing the Faith', for instance, has altered the words of many hymns sometimes simply by replacing the 'thees' and 'thous'. Others blend traditional and contemporary music, allowing different forms of expression to

coexist. Most evangelical churches have modern songs which younger people can relate to. There are many new hymnwriters who pen their verses in modern colloquial language. You will hear one of these from Carolyn Winfrey Gillette (an American Presbyterian Pastor) on 31st May during the Elders' service. These are not acts of compromise, but of communication - ensuring that the message of the gospel is heard as clearly today as it was centuries ago.

The same sort of arguments can also be applied to readings from the Bible. There is no doubt that the King James version of the Bible is a very significant classical and poetic version - admired by many. But the words are often not common parlance these days. There are many, many alternatives to the King James these days. Let's not forget that the Bible was not written in English, which means that every single English Bible that we pick up is already a translation - from Hebrew, Aramaic Greek. They have been brought into English by teams of people who have been trying very hard to be accurate, clear and readable. Sometimes those three things don't always line up perfectly, so different translations lean in different directions. When they were translated determines the colloquialisms that are used and the type of language adopted. Various versions do different jobs.



Some go word for word, trying to stay as close as possible to the original text. Some go thought for thought trying to make the text flow in 'normal' English. Some are more conversational, where the the goal is clarity first, even if it means a little more interpretation. One has to pick a version that you will read (and then actually read it!). I don't think there is one perfect version that makes all tyhe others useless. As you know I am a particular fan of the 'Easy to Read' version. As I have said before, the name is not as appropriate as the text - to my mind, it should be 'The Easy to Understand' version.

And that is the whole point!

If the version you are reading doesn't make entire sense to you then a good tip is to read it in several different versions, until suddenly you think: "Oh, that's what it means!". When I am preparing a service or a talk I often read several versions, to be sure I have understood the text.

If a translation help you understand scripture, that is a win.

If it makes you want to read it more, that is a win.

If it helps you see something clearly that you did not see before, that is a win.

If it makes sense to people who don't normally go to church, that's a win.

So, the challenge in all of this is one of balance. How do we honour the past without becoming bound by it? How do we preserve the depth of our theological language while ensuring it remains accessible? Perhaps the answer lies, not in choosing between old and new, but in holding them together - recognising that language is a living tool, not a static relic.

In the end, the goal of our faith is not merely to be admired, but to be understood. If our words no longer serve that purpose, it may be time to ask, not what we must lose, but what we might gain by speaking afresh.

What we do, and what we say as Christians and how we say it, is vital in portraying our faith, and portraying Jesus as accessible and relevant.

Peter

Apologies! - the thoughts this month are a little on the long side!

Family News

Linda suffered a badly fractured left ankle following a fall. She has had a successful operation to pin it and has to keep weight off it for several weeks. We wish her a full recovery.

Sue has spent some time in Warwick Hospital as a result of kidney problems. She is now at home awaiting the results of tests and we trust all will be well. She has been greatly helped by the love and support shown by everyone during this difficult time.

Katie was very pleased by the result of the recent election in Hungary.

Geoff is no longer driving and would welcome visitors with prior notice.

Ashley is progressing following suspected adverse reaction to new medication.

Irene P. is suffering with problems in her good leg, but is looking forward to a WRVS ceremony she will be involved in shortly.

Ileen Fisher

What's on at the Bear Pit Theatre

The Life of Brian (1979): 2nd May at 7pm

A Bear Pit Community Cinema showing. A sharp, irreverent satire from the Monty Python team, *The Life of Brian* follows Brian Cohen, an ordinary man born next door to Jesus, who is repeatedly and disastrously mistaken for the Messiah.

The film blends biblical parody with political farce, skewering dogma, fanaticism, and the absurdity of organised movements.



Brian's attempts to avoid unwanted followers only entangle him further in revolutionary plots, Roman bureaucracy, and escalating misunderstandings, culminating in one of cinema's most famous darkly comic finales

The film's satire sparked controversy on release, with bans in several local authorities and international regions, yet it has since become widely regarded as one of the greatest comedy films ever made. Its blend of political commentary, linguistic playfulness, and ensemble performance showcases Monty Python at their most ambitious.

Tickets: £6

The Tempest: 6th - 9th May at 7.30pm.

Matinee 9th May at 2.30pm



A Caramba Theatre Company production.

Cast out and betrayed by his own sister, Antonia, Prospero, once the Duke of Milan, has spent the last twelve years in exile on a remote, enchanted island with his daughter Miranda. Far from civilisation, the island thrums with ancient Celtic magic, elemental forces, and unearthly beings bound to the land itself. Through knowledge, wisdom, and force of will,

Prospero has learned to bend the island's mystical powers to his command, surviving and ruling in uneasy harmony. But when fate brings his enemies within reach, Prospero seizes his long-awaited chance for revenge. Conjuring a violent storm, he shipwrecks the remnants of his former life upon the very land that has become his refuge. As the survivors emerge, two worlds collide: the rigid, industrial steampunk court of power, ambition, and hierarchy crashes into an untamed realm of magic, folklore, and elemental truth.

This enchanting retelling of William Shakespeare's final play blends puppetry, original music, and haunting Celtic soundscapes with a bold steampunk aesthetic to bring *The Tempest* vividly to life. Exploring themes of exile, colonisation, forgiveness, and power, this production invites audiences to witness the spectacle as two worlds collide and transformation becomes inevitable.

Tickets: £15 (concessions £13)

A Phoenix Night Rises: 13th to 16th May at 7.30pm

The Phoenix Players proudly present a celebration of creativity, collaboration and original theatre.



This lively evening features comedy sketches, musical performances and two outstanding one-act plays: *What Lies Before Us* by Chloe MacDonald and *Detention Duty* by Baz Stilinski. Created and performed by local talent, this showcase highlights the passion and imagination at the heart of Phoenix Players. Come and support new writing, new ideas and a night full of entertainment.

Tickets: £14

Wicked for Good (2025): 17th May 5pm

A Bear Pit Community Cinema presentation. 'Wicked For Good' continues the story of Elphaba and Glinda, picking up immediately after the events of *Wicked: Part One*. As Oz fractures under political manipulation and fear, Elphaba is forced into hiding while Glinda grapples with the consequences of her rise to public power.

Their once-unlikely friendship becomes the emotional core of a world sliding toward chaos.

Tickets: £6



Try this today: instead of listing what went wrong, name three small things that went right. A warm cup of coffee, a kind word from a stranger, or a quiet moment of sun. Happiness is often just a matter of where you choose to look.

Wishing

Apparently, there is an expression in German for the time of fairy tales and myths: “In the old days when wishing still helped”

There’s a sadness to the thought that wishing once made a difference, but doesn’t any more. There’s not much hope in it. I prefer a philosophy with a little more life in it. If you wish hard enough, we can change things for the better. Wishes, I believe, are another form of prayer.

Prayer worked in the old days, and it still does today.

What lies beneath the surface

The rain had stopped and I looked over the garden wall to the pavement. It was still wet, except for one long strip in the tar. I recalled a pipe being laid there. The wet tarmac and the dry tarmac were the same material, but beneath some of it was rubble and dirt, but beneath that drier strip was a hollow pipe and sand.. It had different heat absorption properties.

I might have looked a little foolish, standing there, contemplating a path. It made me think about the expectations we have of people; how we assume they will respond in a certain way without having the slightest idea what loves and losses lie beneath the surface.

But God does know. The rest of us should err on the side of kindness.

Submitted by Fran Maddy from the Friendship Book

**So what, if I don’t know what Apocalypse means?
It’s not the end of the world!**

A DATE TO REMEMBER



The date is 27th June and the time is 2.30 and the place: Stratford URC church.

About 8 years ago about 20 hopeful singers gathered in a cold St Peters Church and Wellesbourne Community Choir was born. A number of us have been singing with the choir ever since, including myself. It survived covid and lockdown and last year, a change of musical director, and it has flourished. We have sung at community events from Kineton to Hampton Lucy, from churches to garden centres and raised considerable sums for charities. Now for the first time the choir is excited to be singing in Stratford hosted by the URC.

This really is a choir that caters for all musical tastes. We can promise you in June everything from Abba to Rutter, from Florence and the Machine to Sir Karl Jenkins.

More details will follow but for the moment put a big red circle around June 27th.

David Sampson

You don't have to be a
pastor to make a difference.
Your life is your ministry.

Wherever God puts you,
let your character, actions,
and heart be an example
of who Christ is.

@saltandlight.words

Green Corner

This year is special in terms of EcoChurch. We are celebrating 25 years of A Rocha UK, and also 10 years of Eco Church.

Eco Church has suggested how churches might celebrate their Eco Church journey and also celebrate the 10 years of it's existence.

Your Eco Church journey is unique

But like all journeys it benefits from moments along the way to pause, reflect and celebrate how far you have come. These moments can also be valuable opportunities to invite and involve others.



The ideas shared here are just some of the many ways you might choose to reflect on and celebrate your Eco Church journey. While they can be used at any time, there may be natural jumping off points, such as celebrating your Eco Church award, marking an environmental day like Earth Day, or recognising an anniversary like ten years of Eco Church in 2026!

Whatever you choose to do, these celebrations provide a wonderful opportunity for your church to involve others from the wider local community, children or young people from a local school or group, and other churches.

Here are some of the suggestions they have put forward:

Hold a special service or outdoor worship gathering

Exeter Cathedral held a celebration service to honour 21 churches who had achieved Bronze or Silver status.

Holy Redeemer, Lamorbey held a green communion service outside during the Season of Creation

St Mary's, East Grinstead gathered for a family service to celebrate their Gold award. It was followed by a celebratory barbeque with the local MP.

Go on a prayer walk

Take time to walk outside in awe of God's creation. Walk alone or with others. Falmouth Methodist Church's eco group led a guided prayer walk through seven worship stations in a local garden. Each stop included a bible verse and a prayer

Take part in a citizen science or a guided nature walk

Celebrate what's on your doorstep! Do a nature count or other citizen science activity. Invite others in your community to join you on your nature walk.

Plant!

Plant a seed of hope - a tree, a hedge, bulbs, flowers as a visual commemoration.

Cuppa and Cake

Host a Fairtrade coffee and cake morning at one of your usual coffee mornings, or as a special event. Invite local people and neighboring churches.

Host an Eco Exhibition

Exhibit your church eco journey in a creative way. An art exhibition perhaps. The Loving Earth Project has a series of textile panels that can be borrowed and exhibited

Go on a pilgrimage

Walk through a local forrest. Create litter picks to make a difference in your community. Walk between several Eco Churches in a locality.

Get creative with artwork

Make a collage, run a pottery or 'junk modelling' session (?) Get creative in all sorts of ways.

Note from the editors:

It is quite some time since we were awarded our Bronze Eco Church status. We should really consider whether we are eligible for a Silver award and if not, what we

need to do to achieve that. Eco Church has a unique on-line self-assessment form assessing five different categories of church life. We do need to work through that to see where we stand. If anybody in our congregation or membership is interested in helping with that assessment then please contact Peter.

Ascension Day

We are betwixt and between two of the most important festivals in the Christian Calendar, that top and tail the joyful season of Eastertide. We have celebrated Easter Day and we look forward to the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

In between our celebrations of the Lord's resurrection at Easter and the gift of the Holy Spirit to his disciples there occurs Ascension Day. It tends to be the 'poor relative' of the two bigger celebrations. It occurs 40 days after Easter and therefore always falls on a Thursday. This year it is on 14th May.

The Ascension of Jesus into heaven often strikes many Christians as a 'curious' episode. To put it crudely, had Jesus simply ascended vertically into space we would by now expect him to be somewhere in the outer reaches of the solar system, a thought that is hardly an aid to Christian devotion. The Ascension appears in both of the New Testament books authored by Luke, it is mentioned only briefly by Mark and not at all by Matthew and John. The ascension of is foretold in the Old Testament by the prophets and the psalmist, and directly predicted by Jesus himself in the Gospels. It was spelt out in an apocalyptic scene by the prophet Daniel.

"I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven.

And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him.

To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him.

His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed"

In the Acts of the Apostles, it says: *"It was not long after that he was taken up into the sky while they were watching and disappeared into a cloud. As they were straining their eyes to see him, two white-robed men suddenly stood there among*



them. They said: "Men of Galilee, why are you standing there staring at the sky? Jesus has been taken away from you into heaven. And someday, just as you saw him go, he will return".

That description, of course has fed the three-layered concept of the universe. Heaven is up there. We are here on earth, and hell is down below us. With all the scientific knowledge that we have about the universe, that concept just doesn't stand up. But in much artwork across the centuries, heaven is depicted up there among the clouds. We don't believe that, but what must it seem like to non-Christians - and the young people of the world now?

The Ascension marks the end of Jesus's earthly mission, but he gives the disciples the Holy Spirit in his stead, to allow the apostles to continue their earthly work and spread the Good News of Jesus Christ.

There have been many theological discussions and ideas about what the Ascension means, what 'going to heaven' means, and even 'What is heaven?' I would hesitate to add my own views, but I have looked out several quotations from more famous people who have attempted to make sense of the event:

"Many hymns and prayers (mostly from 19th and early 20th century) speak of heaven as "our home", but this is not how the Bible normally sees it. In the Bible, heaven and earth are the two halves of God's created world, both occupying different spaces. "The reality is this: 'heaven' in the Bible is God's space and 'earth' is our space. 'Heaven' isn't just 'the happy place where God's people go when they die', and it certainly isn't our 'home' if by that you mean (as some Christians, sadly, have meant) that our eventual destiny is to leave 'earth' altogether and go to 'heaven' instead." (Tom Wright) God's plan is clearly for a new heaven and a new earth and for them to be joined together when Christ returns in glory. It may be true that 'heaven' will be our temporary home, after this present life, but ultimately there is a new dimension awaiting us".

Revd Malcolm Raby

"...in the Ascension we see the mystery alluded to in the Hebrew Bible acted out in full view of the disciples. You can see now that the Ascension is no quirky interlude between Resurrection and Pentecost but a dramatic consummation that makes sense of them: the Resurrection is the beginning of Christ's heavenly journey, Pentecost the echo on earth of heaven's jubilation at his coronation. The Ascension is crucial, not decorative".

Damian Howard

Commenting on the high priestly portrait of Jesus in the Epistle to the Hebrews, Tom Wright says:

“the point here is that Jesus, having died and been raised from the dead, was then exalted in the ascension to the very throne of the father in order that he might continue to implement the work he had accomplished on earth; and that the role he is thereby taking is that of the true high priest. The priest was and still is one of us”.

“Heaven, in the Bible, is not a future destiny but the other, hidden, dimension of our ordinary life - God’s dimension, if you like. God made heaven and earth; at the last he will remake both and join them together forever. And when we come to the picture of the actual end in Revelation 21-22, we find not ransomed souls making their way to a disembodied heaven but rather the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven to earth, uniting the two in a lasting embrace”

Tom Wright

“The most important thing to see here is that God is not ultimately creating a supernatural place where he lives separated from humans. God’s vision for Heaven and Earth—God’s space and humanity’s space—is that both would be fully integrated as one. God’s space and our space are to overlap, “on Earth as it is in Heaven” (Matthew 6:10), which is what the world looks like in the Garden of Eden as the creation story begins. Recognizing this helps us better understand not only the Garden and temple, but also what it means to say that Jesus ‘ascended’.”

The Bible project

“Our response needs to be one of worship and obedience. In worship, prayer and obedience we can find ourselves sharing now in the life of heaven, which is where Jesus is.

A final thought – many scientists now think that our world is multi-dimensional in a way which is far beyond our understanding (at least it is far beyond my understanding!). Is it possible, therefore that what we call “heaven” exists in a way that transcends our 3-dimensional view of the world?”

Revd Malcolm Raby

Compiled by Peter Horrocks

Lesser-Known Knights of the Round Table:

The knight who was never killed in battle: Sir Vivor

The knight who kept maps up-to-date: Sir Veyor

The knight who exceeded expectations: Sir Pass

Pope Leo

Ann Jones shared, on email, an article from the Guardian newspaper. It is far too long to publish in Link, but here are the opening and closing paragraphs:

In the same way that America's shambolic war on Iran has turned Donald Trump into the most effective EV salesman the world has ever seen, so his attempts to defend said war have produced another unlikely outcome: the rise of a genuine and global theological debate. Led by Pope Leo, but extending across Christian denominations, it's producing the sudden recognition that a kind of progressive Christianity long given over for dead seems to be stirring. Christ is risen, as it were – and if people of good faith push hard, the future could be redefined in powerful ways.

I hope that this 'fight' – between the clergy and ICE, between the pope and the president – continues, because it's providing a theological education to the public at large. For a very long time, people outside faith communities have regarded Christianity as some combination of silly and irrelevant. It's completely fine that they don't convert – any poll will show that rule by atheists would make America a more humane place than it is at present. But it's good for everyone to be reminded that the Christian tradition is powerful, radical and subversive.

PRAYER OF POPE LEO XIV FOR DISARMAMENT AND PEACE

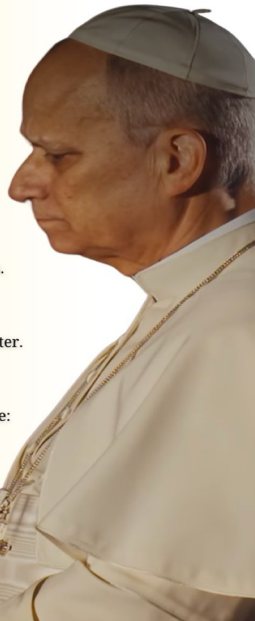
Lord of Life,
you shaped every human being
in your image and likeness.
We believe you created us for communion,
not for for fraternity, not for destruction.
You who greeted your disciples saying,
"Peace be with you, grant us the gift of your peace
and the strength to make it a reality in history.

Today we lift up our prayer for peace in the world,
asking that nations renounce weapons
and choose the path of dialogue and diplomacy.
Disarm our hearts of hatred, resentment,
and indifference,
so we may become instruments of reconciliation.
Help us understand that true security
does not come from control fueled by fear,
but from trust, justice, and solidarity among peoples.

Lord, enlighten the leaders of the nations,
so they may have the courage to abandon
projects of death, halt the arms race,
and place the lives of the most vulnerable at the center.
May the nuclear threat never again dictate the
future of humanity.

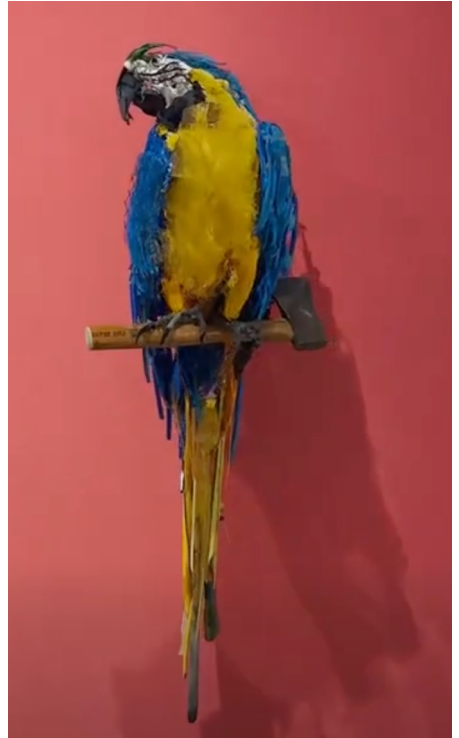
Holy spirit,
make us faithful and creative builders of daily peace:
in our hearts, our families, our communities,
and our cities.

May every kind word,
every gesture of reconciliation,
and every choice for dialogue
be seeds of a new world.
Amen.

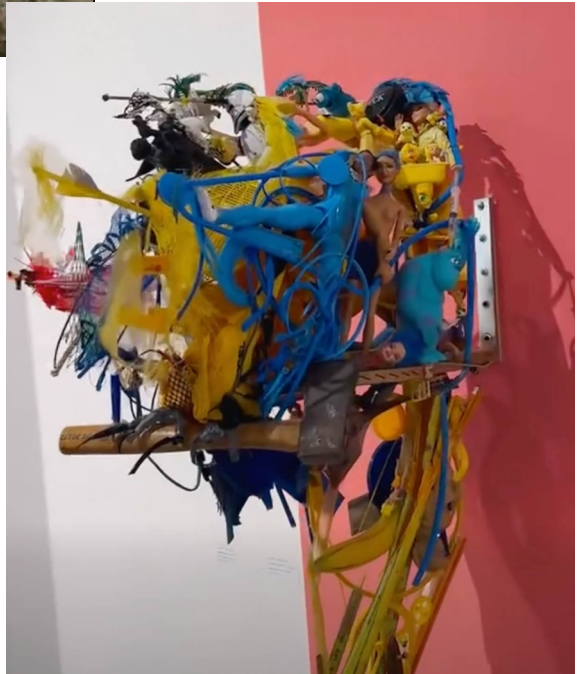


Things aren't always what they seem

Look at these two pictures - they seem to be fairly straightforward images of birds:



They are actually sculptures by an artist called Thomas Deininger.
Now turn the page to see them from the side:



Outward appearances aren't always accurate - you never know what's inside!

Sunday Services at 9.30am

| | | |
|----------|-----------------|---------------------|
| 3rd May | Holy Communion | Revd Robert Maloney |
| 17th May | Morning Service | Tom Meldrum |
| 31st May | Morning Service | Elders |
| 7th June | Holy Communion | Peter Horrocks |

F&F Rota May

Please report any problems with the buildings in May to:

Tom Purves on 01789 293013

or

Iain Kelso on 01789299698 / 077706588984

Flower Rota

| | |
|----------|------------|
| 3rd May | Jill & Rob |
| 17th May | Sue |
| 31st may | Marion |
| 7th June | Ann W |

Link

Because of the way our Sunday services are now structured, the editors have decided that the physical copies of Link magazine will be available on the 1st Sunday of each month rather than the last Sunday of the month. The electronic version may well be available before then. When there are 5 Sundays in the month the Link will be available on that 5th Sunday.

The June edition of Link will be published on the 31st May.

The deadline for submission to the next edition is Monday 25th May 2016.

Please send us your articles, pictures, humour etc.

Editors contact details:

Telephone: 01789 750971 Email: peterhorrocks@doctors.net.uk

MAY 9TH & 10TH 2026
RECREATION GROUNDS

WELCOME
PURSUITS FESTIVAL
**STRATFORD
UPON AVON**

LIVE MUSIC

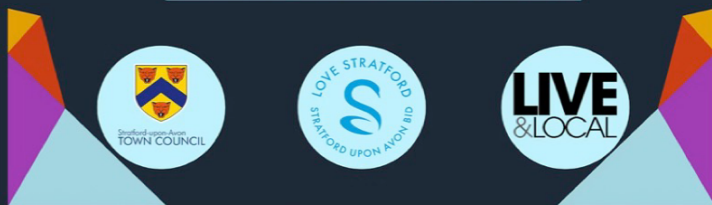
FOOD & DRINK

FREE WORKSHOPS

AXE THROWING

LOCAL VENDORS

& MUCH MORE....



**Call in on the Stratford Churches Together Tent
There will be a Prayer Station
You can request Prayers
You can simply have a discussion**