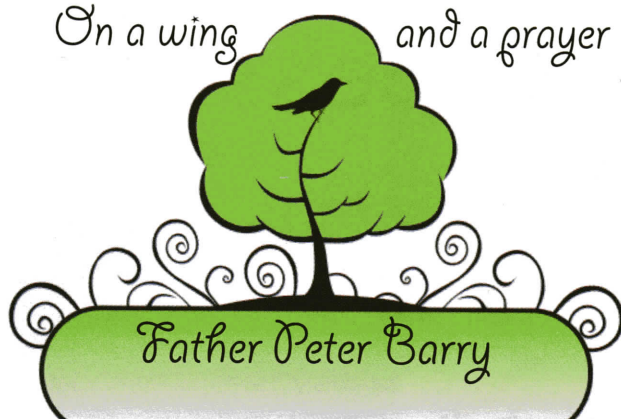


On a wing and a prayer



Saving nature's scavengers

I'm sitting at the airport waiting for a bus into Dhaka, among heavily bearded men. To pass the time, they recite the Koran. A strike has been called by the opposition, from dawn till dusk, which no-one dare break. Everything, even the airport, closes down from dawn till 6.00pm. One of the men, his hair and beard dyed a bright Henna, asks if I am a Muslim. He is disappointed at my reply, but wishes me welcome. Salam Eleyakum, and I reply Eleyakum Salam. After 3 hours, there is transport into Dhaka,

I'm on my way to visit a project, financed by the RSPB and assisted by a generous donation from the parishioners of St Francis' Church in Aberdeen, to re-introduce captive Vultures, from a breeding programme, into the wild. The number of vultures in the Indian sub-continent has tumbled from around 35 million to only 110,000, with tragic consequences.

It means that Vultures, which are nature's scavengers, are no longer cleaning up rotten animal carcasses. Feral dogs, jackals and rats have replaced them, and are thriving. Dog attacks on livestock and people have increased, as has the incidence of rabies. Carcasses pose an increased threat of disease. To dispose of animal carcasses is expensive, which Indian villagers can ill afford.

And if there are no vultures the Parsees cannot dispose of their dead. Corpses are normally left out in special sacred

sites, and are consumed by the birds very quickly. It is forbidden in their religion to bury their dead, as this pollutes the earth, or to cremate their dead, as this pollutes the sky. The culprit: Diclofenac. This medicine is used widely by farmers and vets for a variety of animal ailments.



Vultures feeding from a carcass



Canon Peter Barry with Tania and Munir Khan who head the project to re-introduce captive vultures into the wild

Vultures which eat meat from carcasses containing Diclofenac quickly die from kidney failure and a kind of gout.

Most cattle in India are considered sacred, and are not consumed by people, but die naturally, and are consumed by vultures. It has been shown that even if 1% of animal carcasses contain lethal levels of the drug, it is enough to have caused the almost total collapse of vulture numbers. Diclofenac is now banned, and a substitute, Miloxicam, has now been patented.

The project is headed by a local couple, Tania and Munir Khan. They guard an area of rain forest where vulture numbers have risen to around 26. I stay at their home, where they have ten cats, among them a pair of orphaned fishing cats, which are fed in a special cage as they will kill the other cats if set free. They are still tiny, and will be reintroduced into the wild after 6 weeks.

A girl of 13 visits the house to clean. She has been withdrawn from School as they cannot afford the school fees. I offer to pay, but Tania tells me it is too late. So what is her future, I ask. Already they are looking for a suitable husband!

Bangladesh is not for the faint hearted. Visitors are unusual, and are stared at from very close range: the comfort zone seems to be around 2 feet, but this is a country with 1,100 people per square kilometre.

There are beggars everywhere, often in a pitiable condition. At the railway station a young man, whose remaining leg is covered in open sores, bleats for alms in a plaintive voice. He drags himself along the platform, clutching a few Taka, as Muslims are obliged to give to charity. Others live exactly where they have been born, on the little islands which separate the tracks. Blind men sing verses from the Koran, young children in rags crowd around and plead for hand-outs. It's impossible to give to them all, and guilt kicks in with a vengeance.

And I think of the man who knocks on my door to complain that a parishioner has parked their car on a Sunday morning (for 1 hour) in his street!