

## Wednesday Reflection: Squirrels

Entitled, *Ode to a Squirrel*, a poem by a Chatsworth Lady begins:

With beady eyes and bushy tail  
My garden beds thou doth assail  
And busy little furry paws  
Tipped with Wolverine-ish claws  
Through every day, from break of dawn,  
Dig holes by hundreds in my lawn.

And the closing verse is apocalyptically dramatic:

I'm certain, when this earth is headin'  
At full-tilt speed toward Armageddon,  
Who'll survive the ending of the world:  
'Twill be the Cockroach and... the Squirrel.

The red squirrel with its long tail is the national mammal of Denmark and it is a common feature in English heraldry. However, in the Middle Ages, the attractive rodent became a symbol of the devil with its fiery red colour and lightning speed. In Celtic mythology, the war goddess, Maeve, is often depicted with a squirrel on her shoulder; the squirrel being a messenger between this world and the next. In Norse mythology, Ratatoskr is a squirrel which runs up and down a mythical tree carrying messages between the eagle at the top and the dragon/serpent at the root. In Hindu mythology, it is a small brown squirrel which helps Lord Rama build a bridge over the sea. The moral of the story is that no task is too small in the service of Lord Rama.

In our Scriptures, there are references to foxes, eagles, snakes, locusts, lions, ‘leviathans’, doves, sparrows, fish and whales but no squirrels. In the manse garden, squirrels are regular visitors: burrowing on the lawn, racing along tops of boundary fences, leaping from trees to the roof of the house and back again and, of course, playfully chasing one another. Squirrels are particularly adept at crawling down a tree headfirst. Despite what we often think, the grey and red squirrels do not hibernate: they sleep for much of the day when it is cold and, when awake, retrieve the food which they have buried and hidden away earlier. Cute, endearing and a delight to watch, squirrels share their name with the herbaceous perennial the *Lilac Squirrel* or *Squirrel’s Tail*. With its hanging, striking pinkish-purple foliage, the plant appears about now, in late summer and early autumn. In Pittsburgh in the US, there is a neighbourhood called ‘Squirrel Hill’, the name of which comes from Native Americans who lived in that area amidst an abundance of black squirrels.

I recently read the phrase ‘nature deficit disorder’. For me, this suggests that human beings need the medicine and therapy of nature; of nature’s vibrant life and tranquil beauty. God is to be found in Scripture, through the love of family and friendships, in service to others and, surely, in nature. With their frenetic activity and diligent preparedness, we are encouraged in our lives to be active and prepared. But, more than that, if we take time to watch and enjoy the wonder of squirrels, we receive a gentle blessing from God.

St Francis of Assisi understood that the particular and the ordinary were a gateway to heaven, to Eternity. The poet, Daniel Ladinsky, paraphrases the experience of Francis in his poem, *The Sacraments*. St Francis said:

I once spoke to my friend, an old squirrel, about the  
Sacraments –  
he got so excited

and ran into a hollow in his tree and came  
back holding some acorns, an owl feather,  
and a ribbon he had found.

And I just smiled and said, ‘Yes, dear,  
you understand:

everything imparts  
His grace’.