

The tale of the Bat

A year or two ago, a little bat flew into our church and decided to hibernate there, hanging upside down with its wing membranes neatly folded. You might have noticed a tiny scrap of fur clinging to the side of the bas-relief panel above the altar. There he stayed, all alone for most of the week, perhaps listening to our hymns and homilies on Sunday mornings.

We left the bat alone, but then one freezing winter night the temperature must have dropped too low even for a bat, and its tiny heart stopped beating. Its claws held the mummified body there - until this week, when a gentle duster finally dislodged the tiny creature.

It is a Pipistrelle, Britain's smallest bat, and one of the most common. It lives on small flies and midges, emerging just after sunset to fly among the trees, detecting insects by using sounds that are too high for humans to hear. Bats are mammals that give birth to one baby a year and suckle them with rich milk. Their "wings" are actually formed of delicate skin stretched between extended finger bones.

Pipistrelles often use churches for roosting and hibernation, crawling through small holes in the roof and hanging from the rafters. The name comes from the latin *Vespertilio*, from *Vesper* evening, because of its nocturnal habits. The pipistrelle bat comes out to fly at the time of the evening prayer, Vespers.

Bats would have been a familiar sight in ancient Palestine, especially in the fertile Jordan valley where there are plenty of insects for them to feed on; and bats are mentioned three times in the bible. The books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus list them together with birds, because bats are flying creatures.

The prophet Isaiah wrote this, describing the day of Judgement:

... on that day people will throw away
to the moles and to the bats
their idols of silver and their idols of gold
which they made for themselves to worship
to enter the caverns of the rocks
and the clefts in the crags

Isaiah 2.20

The rocky clefts and caverns of Palestine would have been perfect roosting places for bats – did Isaiah know that?

The Welsh poet and clergyman R S Thomas wrote:

To one kneeling down no word came,
Only the mind's song, saddening the lips
Of the grave saints, rigid in glass;
Or the dry whisper of unseen wings,
Bats not angels, in the high roof.

"In a Country Church" (1955)