

NJPN Column in the Catholic Universe - Andrew Rollinson: Herald of happier days

It happened in what appeared to be the most godforsaken of places. Eight lanes of traffic, and during rush *hours* too [for it had ceased to be the singular 'hour' long ago]. A modern *autogeddon*, separated only by a small patch of white painted crosshatch markings (about 10ft by 4ft) on the tarmac between two sets of dual carriageways. Traffic thundered past.

Here my wife's car broke down. It was early morning and she was on her way to work. I was woken by her telephone call asking me whether she should stay in the car, whereupon I cycled to meet her. Together we pushed the vehicle into the cross-hatched area, scrambled to the roadside, then waited for the breakdown truck and the police to arrive.

The police never came and the RAC were 30 minutes. During this time, we experienced two memorable events.

First, the Good Samaritan: Only one person stopped to ask if we needed any help: a 'white van man', a stranger who halted his journey and came to speak with us. We thanked him for his kindness but said that we were fine because assistance was on its way. Of the others, we did see my aunt drive past and mouth the words "are you okay?" But she drove on without stopping. Then, when my wife arrived at work, she was met by many of her friends who each reported that they'd passed her by the roadside with our abandoned car. "Why didn't any of them stop and offer to help?" my wife joked when she returned home later.

Secondly, the rare royal visitor: By the roadside the land fell away into a ditch, its grassy sides covered with oily dirt, fast food cartons, drinking cups, polythene wrapping and many other articles of rubbish, while at its base a pallid expanse of clay-coloured water slowly seeped into a concrete culvert. Out of this culvert came a dazzling flash of iridescent blue. A kingfisher. Its royal blue and tangerine body darted by right before me, flew gracefully and silently above the water's surface, then was gone.

According to the RSPB, few people ever see a kingfisher. There are only believed to be about 6000 pairs in the UK. Another name for the kingfisher is 'halcyon', from the Greek. It is said to herald the onset of happier days and to calm life's often choppy waters.

Dr Andrew Rollinson is an independent energy engineer and a member of the NJPN Environment Group.