

I like to pray outside in the early morning here between matins and lauds. Others might talk of praying with the clouds, and of the daily changes they symbolise, or praying with the trees, and the seasonal changes they signify. But I pray with the birds: they offer sight and sound, beauty and life, presence and absence.

Sometimes our timetables coincide wonderfully. In April I step out into the energy and life of the full dawn chorus, echoing the psalm we've just sung. 'My heart is ready, O God; I will sing, sing your praise. Awake, my soul.' My unfolding day is accompanied by the wagtails bobbing busy outside my window, the pigeons clattering clumsy through the trees. The extrovert robins are always curious, first to respond when I'm working in our wood; the wrens are shy, easily heard, but only occasionally do I glimpse their whirring wings. The midday heat is pierced by the cry of the buzzards hovering high above the hills, then the evening sky shows the long lines of rooks returning from their work in the fields to their rest in the trees. Winter is heralded by the gulls fleeing the coast at the approach of cold weather, spring by the haunting cry of the curlews as they settle far off in the valley, and early summer by the full arrival of house-martins and swallows and swifts.

Many of you I realise will not share my sentimental rhapsodising about birds. Leviticus has a long list of unclean birds, including *the black vulture, the red kite, the white owl*. Proverbs describes how an undeserved curse goes nowhere - like a sparrow in its flitting, like a swallow in its flying. The prophet Zephaniah foresees the destruction of the exultant city Nineveh, its desolation signified by *the owl hooting at the window, the raven croaking on the threshold*. For many birds are at best to be dismissed, at worst to be feared. It was seeing a farmer attacked by seagulls while ploughing a field that inspired Daphne du Maurier to write 'the Birds', the film of which left one reviewer determined to leave no tern unstoned. Many years ago here, one monk so disliked the jackdaws nesting outside his window that he fed them with bread soaked in whisky before clubbing them to death. Birds are to preyed on not prayed with.

In my defence, there is a long, strong tradition linking birds to saints. – such as the famous exchange between Benedict and the raven, who came to him for his daily bread. Benedict asked him to safely remove the poisoned bread he had received from a jealous local priest. *Then the raven, opening his mouth, and lifting up his wings, began to hop up and down about the loaf, and after his manner to cry out, as though he would have said that he was willing to obey, and yet could not do what he was commanded*. Benedict reassured him *Take it up without fear, and throw it where no man may find it*. Finally, reluctantly, the raven took it and flew away.

It's not just that saints are kind towards birds. Something happens to both parties in these exchanges. In the sixth century a curlew rescues a book of sermons which St Beuno has dropped into the sea when walking across the water off Anglesey. The curlew had been seen as the herald of death, its cry not beautiful but cold and sour, but Beuno rewards the bird by protecting its nesting site.

Similarly Cuthbert, on the Inner Farne, places the eider ducks (known even today as Cuddy ducks) under his special protection, in return for their eggs. This reveals both the holiness of Cuthbert and a sort of return to Eden, where the animals obey and work for man. At about the same time in France, the more obscure saint Carileff did not disturb a wren who had laid her egg in the hood of his cowl, which he had hung on an oak tree whilst out looking for a site for a hermitage. On return, his Abbot told Carileff that this event was a clear sign of where to start his new life.

The most famous image, of course, is Francis running towards a gathering of birds - to invite them to praise their Creator for his gifts. 'At these words, the birds rejoiced, stretching their necks, spreading their wings, opening their beaks. They looked at Francis, who blessed them and gave them permission to fly off.

His famous canticle is not a prayer to creation but a prayer to the creator. *Be praised, my Lord, through all your creatures*. There is a subtle but vital difference between 'praise them' and 'praise him'. We see this in the psalms - *praise the Lord from the earth, sea creatures...beasts, wild and*

*tame, reptiles and birds on the wing.* Praying with the birds means praising Him not praising them. Francis went out from his encounter with the birds to exhort all creatures to praise, echoing that vision of Isaiah. *For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.*

It's not that nature replaces God as the object of our love. By joining with creation I come to understand my place in this universe. Just as individually I find my unity in praising God, so creation finds its unity in praising God. *let everything that lives and that breathes give praise to the Lord.*

This is more than a pretty picture. Praying with the birds does not mean simply that I observe their world, drawing parallels from their sheer variety, like those medieval theologians who saw the pelican as a symbol of the eucharist in feeding its young from its own breast, or the phoenix, rising from the ashes, as a symbol of the resurrection.

Praying with the birds involves a more visceral personal engagement. The psalmist crying out in his distress "O that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest;" or rejoicing in his love for the temple - with the sparrow and the swallow who also find there a nest, a home. In the gospels Jesus expresses his sadness "Jerusalem, Jerusalem...how often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not.'

I know there is a strong tradition of mystical prayer which emphasises the dangers of images from creation and the need to find God beyond his creation. But when Jesus said 'look at the birds of the air', he was, Pope Francis explains in *Laudato Si*, inviting us 'to be attentive to the beauty that there is in the world because he himself was in constant touch with nature, lending it an attention full of fondness and wonder...

Creation is a not a world we simply observe – but something through which God draws us in, touches us. When the Ancient Mariner callously, casually shoots the albatross that had guided his boat out of Antarctic ice, he brings down a curse on his ship, whose crew hang the albatross around his neck, before, one by one, they all die. The only redemption he finds, the albatross falling from his neck, occurs when instead of cursing the 'slimy' creatures in the sea, he suddenly sees their true beauty. *A spring of love gushed from my heart and I blessed them unawares.* Coleridge concludes: *'He prayeth best, who loveth best all things both great and small; For the dear God who loveth us, he made and loveth all'*

This rather sugary summary is echoed more profoundly by Pope Francis as *'the mystery of Christ at work in a hidden manner in the natural world as a whole.'* The world is not only created, it is redeemed. The creative word became flesh, restoring the fullness of life, destroying the power of death. *The New Testament does not only tell us of the earthly Jesus and his tangible and loving relationship with the world. It also shows him risen and glorious, present throughout creation by his universal Lordship*

This is why I pray with the birds. I do not preach to them, they preach to me of the hidden Christ. They strengthen me in the different aspects of my vocation – the collective busy-ness of the housemartins' piping, the melancholic solitude of the curlew's call, the peaceful reassurance of the pigeons' purring. The birds here all year round, the crows and jackdaws, unspectacular but constant, point me back to the unglamorous fidelity of daily life. The occasional visitors, the unexpected sound of geese approaching overhead in formation, remind me to be attentive to the God of surprises.

The pope concludes *'the creatures of this world no longer appear to us under merely natural guise, because the risen One is mysteriously holding them to himself and directing them towards fullness as their end. The very flowers of the field and the birds which his human eyes contemplated and admired are now imbued with his radiant presence.'*

