

## A thrush's song speaks to us of a larger world, one of which we are not the centre



I met John Wilkins in Rome, celebrating the Feast of St Bede. I knew him by name, as editor of The Tablet. We soon discovered that we shared a passion for birds. So two days later, we went to the Villa Ada, Rome's loveliest park, to listen to nightingales sing. Unforgettable! Thank you, St Bede, for thoughtfully dying in May, the month for birdsong.

Our Lord invited us to "look at the birds of the air" (Matthew 6:26), and Helen Waddell's delightful *Beasts and Saints* translates many of the medieval stories: St Columba bidding one of his brothers to care for a weary "pilgrim guest", a migrating crane; St Malo hosting a nesting wren in his cloak; St Kevin, a nesting blackbird in his cupped hand; St Werburga restoring to life a wild goose; St Bartholomew on Farne Island being summoned by a seaduck to rescue her duckling.

In the sixteenth century, Michael Drayton described "all feathered things yet ever known to men, / From the huge roc unto the little wren" entering Noah's ark. Three centuries later, Gerard Manley Hopkins was reminded of Christ by the power and beauty of a hovering kestrel. In June, I was blessed to spend a week at a meeting at Mondaye, a Norbertine abbey near Bayeux. The community of canons care for their land so well that it is a haven of birdlife: clouds of swallows, swifts and martins, rarer in the surrounding farmland, circled the evening skies. My own community at Boarbank Hall in Cumbria will be restarting next spring our annual "retreats" for birdwatchers, entitled "Two Wings and Some Prayers".

We share enough with birds to sense our kinship with them. They too live in a visual, daytime world, respond to colour, communicate through song. They too build homes, guard territories, bond in pairs, protect and nurture their young. Yet we can only marvel as envious outsiders while they soar, flap, hover, twist, roll and dive through the air. Moreover, they are vastly different from one another: pelicans, parakeets and puffins; hawfinches, herons and hummingbirds; kingfishers, kittiwakes and kites.

As the birdsong that was loud in May quietens into autumn, the Church begins to celebrate Creationtide. This ecumenical season starts on 1 September, the first day of the Orthodox ecclesial year, embraces the time of harvest festivals and concludes on 4 October, the Feast of St Francis, patron saint of ecology. We are invited to reflect on the myriad creatures that share the life of our planet, in the light of our faith in God, Creator of all that exists.

Birds can help us with this precisely because they are both like and unlike us. They are like us enough to reveal their kinship as fellow creatures of a loving God. They are unlike us enough to remind us that the Creator's activity is not limited by our categories. When we pause to admire creatures that are beautiful in ways beyond ours, we pay homage to a Maker far greater than our imagination. Sparrowhawks and spoonbills are marvellous because, in their very difference, they point to something and someone incomparably vaster than our little minds. A thrush's song echoing through a wood speaks to us of a larger world, one of which we are not the centre.

To believe that the world is created is to see it as a gift of love. When we give thanks for the delicacy of a goldcrest, we go beyond gratitude for what is our own to a wider praise of the "Maker of all things visible". When we wonder at the nest of a weaver bird, we expand our sense of the Wisdom "through whom all things were made". When we rejoice at the exuberant song of the mounting skylark, we enrich our understanding of "the Lord, the giver of Life". For God was not made in the image of Man. As human beings, on the other hand, to be made in the image of God is to find our joy in so much more than what is merely human. Nothing that is God's is alien to us.

The Season of Creation gives us space to grieve for the harm to our common home, to repent, to make new resolutions. As Christians, however, we must begin with gratitude, wonder and joy for a world that is, to paraphrase St Paul, immeasurably more than we could ever ask or imagine.

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