

Epilogue at Countisbury – Sunday 5th July

Listen to 'On hearing the first cuckoo in spring' by Delius as we gather our thoughts (approx. 6 minutes)

The beginning of spring this year coincided with the beginning of lockdown, all of which seems a very long time ago now. I have been thinking a lot about the natural world around us, and particularly about the birds. Talking with friends I am aware that birdsong has become the background soundtrack to the slower, quieter lives we have of necessity been leading.

Here in North Devon it has become a time of unfamiliar stillness, even in this normally quiet place. The poet Edward Thomas captured this in his poem 'Adlestrop', looking back to a moment of serenity and calm in 1914 from the clamour of the First World War:

Yes. I remember Adlestrop—
The name, because one afternoon
Of heat the express-train drew up there
Unwontedly. It was late June.

The steam hissed. Someone cleared his throat.
No one left and no one came
On the bare platform. What I saw
Was Adlestrop—only the name

And willows, willow-herb, and grass,
And meadowsweet, and haycocks dry,
No whit less still and lonely fair
Than the high cloudlets in the sky.

And for that minute a blackbird sang
Close by, and round him, mistier,
Farther and farther, all the birds
Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire.

Our opportunity for stillness has lasted nearly four months.

I recall Pauline telling me how wonderful it was to hear a cuckoo in Lynton. Roland and I have taken a long walk on the moor every Sunday, and thrilled to hear the skylarks sing so constantly. Now at midsummer the garden birds start calling soon after four in the morning, and they are still singing late in the evening as dusk falls. I find that during this perplexing and frightening pandemic their song has offered potent reminders of beauty, reassurance and renewal.

I have also been marvelling at how 'other' the birds are, their lives so different to ours; their colours and feathers, their flying abilities, their perception of the world. I read a recent report of a cuckoo that had flown more than 20,000 miles during its annual migration from Siberia to Southern Africa and back. And yet they live alongside us in our everyday lives, often very

close, part of the treasures of Creation if we choose to notice. Lockdown has increased our opportunities to do so. And in noticing we can learn, as Jesus so often encourages us to do:

Matthew Chapter 6, 25 - 34

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?

And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

I love the phrase 'the birds of the air'. My favourite columnist Tim Dowling, who writes in the Guardian about the small things of his everyday life at home, wrote recently about his lockdown 'projects' – to restore a table and:

'...to get the birds of the air to land on me, as if I were St Francis of Assisi. This involves sitting very still in the garden for long periods, with a crossword puzzle and a little pile of seed on each knee.

... So my friends will ask: did you manage to accomplish anything during lockdown? And I will say: just this. And I will reach out both arms, and the birds of the air will fly from all across Acton to land on them, lining up from shoulder to fingertip – robins, finches, wrens, parakeets – and they will not flinch when I bend my arm to point and say: also I restored that table.'

It's an amusing piece, but it also reminds me of St Francis of Assisi and his appreciation of and ministry to the whole of the natural world, of God's world. Tim's open arms, trying to tame and reassure the birds, make me think of Stanley Spencer's painting 'St Francis and the Birds' (1935). It's a strange and rather grotesque painting, and was considered offensive by some critics at the time, but Spencer said he intended to convey a global and inclusive embrace in the saint's bulbous outstretched arms, which dominate the picture [it is easy to find an image on the internet].

I think open arms are the key physical representation of trust, in both the trusting and the trusted. They signify open-ness and submission and vulnerability, and they also signify protection and accessibility and love. All these aspects of trust seem to come together in Jesus' open arms on the cross.

So I find all my thoughts have tended towards the concepts of stillness, simplicity and trust.

Being open to the world around me and listening, as we have been able to do.

Reminding myself that life does not have to be as complex as I would make it, that we already have our place in God's world and are cared for tenderly by Him.

And marvelling at how easy trust can be, for the giver and the receiver, if I just open my arms.

Please join me in saying together the words of Psalm 121:

Let us say the Lord's Prayer together:

And finally let us sing this hymn which is loved for its beautiful melody but whose words are actually a prayer which expresses everything I have tried to explore this evening:

Dear Lord and Father of mankind.

At the close of the meeting I would have liked to play a recording of 'The Lark Ascending' by Vaughn Williams, which would send us on our way in a beautiful atmosphere of serenity and calm, but it usually lasts about 15 minutes! If you have the chance to listen for yourselves, please do.