

Morningside

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Matthew 10: 29-31. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid. You are of more value than many sparrows.

When Jesus looked at birds he thought of God. What do you think of when you look at birds?

If you are a birdwatcher you might think about beauty. You might think of rarity or statistics, but most of all I hope you will think of beauty. A photographer friend of mine takes bird pictures of extraordinary beauty; yet she limits herself to one species. She photographs only swans. Other photographers do the same with kingfishers or blue tits or puffins. The variety of the beauty! There are bird feeders in our garden and we can watch an astonishing range of birds feeding and flying and playing and singing – starlings and sparrows and finches and, of course, pigeons. Pheasants walk across our lawn, a buzzard sits in a tree fifty yards from our door, and until recently, you could walk through the streets of Dunfermline and admire the peacocks strutting beside you. How extraordinarily beautiful is the tail of a peacock.

Look at birds and see: and listen. For the last few years the most popular piece of music on classic FM has been “The Lark Ascending”, by Vaughan Williams. I have never voted for it, but I do appreciate how evocative it is of one of the sweetest sounds in nature. The rich, fruity song of the blackbird, the laughter of the thrush, the other-worldly song of the curlew. Listen to the beauty of birds.

Look, and listen, and think of God. How wonderful is the creation of God, how beautiful the works of God’s hands. However secular are the times we live in, these cheeky, gorgeous, companions of our earthly

journey can open our eyes and hearts and souls to the work of God and the gift of God and the presence of God.

*Each little flower that opens, each little bird that sings  
He made their glowing colours, He made their tiny wings.*

But maybe you have no interest in bird-watching. Maybe you are more of a literary type. Have you read “H is for Hawk”? If it is about the beauty of a bird it is the terrible beauty of a goshawk; and a woman’s obsession with this wildest of creatures. As she tries and tries, with grief and love and despair, to tame this magnificent creature she leads her readers into one of the oldest struggles in the world: and the bird begins to show here who she is, as at the same time the writer helps the readers to discover the fierce, frightening and frightened spirit of Mabel, her hawk. And as you read the book you find yourself thinking about god: about god and the created world and the deep questions about human beings and the animal kingdom. The book ends with the author’s reflection on her bird *Mabel is more than a hawk. She feels like a protecting spirit. Some things only happen once, twice in a lifetime. The world is full of signs and wonders that come, and go, and if you are lucky you might be alive to see them. I had thought the world was ending, but my hawk had saved me again, and all the terror was gone.* Look at birds and think of God. Think of God and mystery, and terrible beauty, .... ..and life.

Did I say look at birds and think of mystery? Is there any mystery in the whole wide world more remarkable than the mystery of the migration of birds? Other creatures have dramatic migrations as well, but think about ospreys. Have you ever been to the osprey hide at Loch Garten? Or followed the story on the RSPB website. When the time comes, when the nights of Inverness-shire get longer and the water gets colder, and the young are grown bigger, the leaving begins. The mother leaves first, setting off on her solitary journey to West Africa. Sometime later she will be followed by the father, again flying solo. That leaves

the young ospreys, maybe two of them. They wait – remember this is their first months of life, they have never done this before. Then one sets off, completely on her own. And then a few days later the last one leaves the nest. They are about to journey over four thousand miles to Africa. It will take them more than forty days to reach a destination they have never seen, flying completely alone. And neither of these young birds will ever have flown more than a few miles from the nest before. Staggering does not say enough. How wonderful is our world? And these birds might make you think of all the mystery of life and of God.

Jesus looked at birds and thought about God. Here's what he said: *Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid. You are of more value than many sparrows.*

It is the end of a long passage in which Jesus is encouraging those who are being sent out to tell the world about Jesus and the love of God. He knows that they are scared. Any one of us is scared when it comes to saying anything to anyone about God: but our fear is of embarrassment or being sneered at. In the first century it was coming persecution they were afraid of; and Jesus says to them simply "Do not be afraid".

Easier said than done. But look at the birds, Jesus says. Look at the birds and think of God. What can be more common, more insignificant, more worthless than a sparrow? Two for a penny. And yet not one falls to the earth without your Father. Do not be afraid: you are worth more than many sparrows.

Hamlet quoted this almost exactly when he said *There's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow.* And it might be an even more wonderful saying than we are used to thinking. My old teacher

Professor William Barclay used to suggest that the word for “Fall” in the text does not really mean “fall to the ground and die” but means to light upon the ground. If he is right - and you may be the only Edinburgh congregation ever to have heard this – then what Jesus is saying is not that God marks the sparrow when the sparrow falls dead; it is far more; it is that God marks the sparrow every time it lights and hops upon the ground. What Jesus is saying is “if God cares like that for sparrows, how much more does he care for people”

Either way Jesus looks at birds and thinks about God and wants us to think about God. And we should always begin with Jesus. To think about God begin with Jesus and what he did, healing, forgiving, liberating. Begin with Jesus and what he said: stories about a lost sheep and a good Samaritan. Begin with Jesus crucified and praying *Father, into your hands I commit my spirit*

It isn't just anyone who says “Look at the birds and think of God”. This is what Jesus says. Not a single sparrow hops about on the ground without your Father's care. Do not be afraid. You are worth more than many sparrows.

Take that saying of Jesus into the week ahead. It may be a week full of family worry; or a week full of stress at work. It may be a week when you are thinking about giving up on faith. Or a week when your lifelong struggles are just becoming too much for you. Suddenly a little bird lands beside you, looks up at you and hops in front of you. You remember that Jesus told us to look at the birds and think of God. What you are to think is that you are worth more than many sparrows. Do not be afraid.