



# Birds and the Spiritual Life

**A Bird's Eye View** by Alison Morgan

**F**or most of my life I have lived in cities. Complicated places. I often wonder, how do you make sense of all that goes on in a city, where nothing is ever still, nothing ever quiet, where a sea of humanity goes about its business? How do you find out what life is all about, when it seems to be about everything and nothing? Where do you start, if you want to find God?

I wasn't brought up a Christian. But one day when I was a student, after exams, I took myself for a long walk in the countryside. And I found myself watching the wind pass over a field of barley, barley which has those long tufted ears attached to each head. And they moved, like a wave crossing a golden sea, moved by this invisible wind. The Bible teaches that this wind is a picture of the Holy Spirit, blowing where he wills, invisible in himself but visible in his effects. I didn't know that then, and I don't think I'd ever heard of the Holy Spirit. But I wondered.

A little later I was on holiday in Devon. I found myself sitting on the top of a hill, watching a buzzard soar over the fields below. Nothing unusual about that; I'd seen it dozens of times before. But as it turned on the thermals, scanning the ground far below, it suddenly seemed to me that there was a message in its flight. It seemed to me that somehow here in the flight of this buzzard was a picture of my search, an answer to my questions. What was life all about? How could I make sense of it? As I watched the buzzard, it suddenly occurred to me that I couldn't. We are too close to it all, too close to the ground to see the patterns that the buzzard could see from the air, the patterns of interlocking fields and woods and hedges. But that didn't mean there wasn't a pattern. The buzzard saw it, and God could see it. And it was as if he was showing me a glimpse of the pattern he saw, and telling me there were answers, even if I couldn't yet see them.

I became a Christian. And gradually I began to look at the world in a different way, a way

that made more sense. I learned how to think about my life, how to see it as a journey, as a part of God's purposes. I learned these things in different ways. But often I learned as St Paul says in his letter to the Romans: just by looking at the things he has made – by looking at the created world.

**Romans 1.20:** *Ever since the creation of the world, God's eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made.*

## Journey of the mind to God

Many of the greatest spiritual writers of history began their search for God in the same way I began mine. The greatest writer of the Franciscan movement was St Bonaventure. He used to act as spiritual director to novice monks, teaching them how to develop their relationship with God. One of his works is called 'The journey of the mind to God'. It's the journey that began for me as I watched the buzzard soaring over the field in Devon. And Bonaventure says it's a journey we can all go on. It's not complicated. Prayer is like climbing a ladder. You start at the bottom by focussing on the simple things of nature, and you gradually ascend until you are caught up into God himself. It's that same verse:

*Ever since the creation of the world, God's eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made.*

I think this is where birdwatchers are at an enormous advantage. We used to go often to Rutland Water, and we would watch the ospreys come, and go, and come again. How do they do it? How do they find their way? Or there are the little willow warblers which make the same journey, and come back year after year. Or the goosanders which come in the winter, with feathers glowing pink against the frozen ice of the lake. Or the chaffinches which sing in the hawthorn each spring – did you know they sing 64 notes per second? Or kingfishers, with their brilliant iridescent blue feathers. Or even blue tits. I saw a film



once where it showed you what a male blue tit looks like to a female blue tit, who has ultraviolet vision – and it was magnificent. He has an utterly irresistible sort of purple halo...

So not only can we not see the pattern of things as God sees it, but we can't even see the colours, the beauty of them. It fills me with amazement. What does Bonaventure have to say about all this? Is it all a glorious coincidence? Well, he's quite blunt: *He who does not turn towards the First Principle on account of such indications . . . is stupid.*

## Jesus and the created world

Jesus too talked a lot about the natural world. He told a story about a sower. A man plants some seed. Some grows, some doesn't, it depends on the ground it lands in. People are like that, Jesus says – some respond to what they see and hear of God, some don't. He told another story, about mustard seed. Plant a mustard seed, a tiny thing, he said, and it will grow into a great bush in which all sorts of birds will come and make their nests. Think about it, he said, because that's what the kingdom of God is like. There's room for everyone, whoever they are, whatever they are like. These are questions we need to let him ask us – what kind of soil are you? Where are you making your nest?

He gave examples from the natural world too, as he explained things. God loves you, he said. Do you think God doesn't know the life of every single sparrow? Do you think it doesn't fall to the ground without him knowing it? Do you think he doesn't provide it with food, and that he won't meet your needs too in just the same way?

Why did Jesus talk so much about the created world? Was it just because he was teaching in the countryside, and it was all around them – or is there more to it than that? I think there was. Paul understood it when he wrote that it's through the things that have been made that we can get to understand the God who made them. Bonaventure said the natural world offers us the first steps on the ladder which leads to God. Why? Because the world is built in a way which reflects the one who made it. There is not just a similarity, but an

affinity, between the created world we can see and the spiritual world we can't. And over the years I've learnt to look for God not in the abstract and difficult places of the invisible world, but in the concrete reality of the here and now. Are you looking for God? Start with what you can see – with the things he has made. After all, as St Augustine said, 'Only those who know how to read and write can read the pages of Scripture, while everyone, including the unlettered, can read out of the book of the Universe.' So – how do we do that, what should we look for?

## A bird can be a sign

First of all, a bird can function as a sign, as that first buzzard did for me. It still happens; so regularly in fact that I have learnt to actually ask for it. The first time was in Zambia, where I was leading a series of conferences for church leaders. We were teaching in an enormous barn-like church. Day one was hard work. But as we prepared for day two we read psalm 84:



*My heart sings for joy to the living God. Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may rear her young at your altar, my king and my God. Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise.*

As we walked into the church I looked up. There, flying from end to end, was a lesser striped swallow. It had done what the psalm said – built its nest over the door of the church. And it spent the whole day flying above the rafters, from nest to altar and back again. To me it was a sign: a sign of God's presence and of his blessing on us.

## A bird can be a model

So for me a bird can function as a sign; it's become one of the ways God speaks to me. But there's another way, too, that a bird can lead us to God. A bird can function as a model, an example of how we should be.

For many years we holidayed in Swaledale, staying in an old stone farmhouse at the top of the valley. One year I had to take a blue tit with me. This particular blue tit had been rescued from a cat by the boy up the road. He was not fledged, still half feathered and with his eyes just opening. We called him Guy

(pictured below left), after the boy who brought him. I kept him warm and fed him insect mix. He grew, and fledged – in the kitchen. He got to the stage where he should have been following us from bush to bush learning to find aphids. We did have some aphid practice, but a lot of the time it had to be mealworms. And that year, Guy came with us on holiday. Watching him was instructive. Every morning he had a set routine. He would get up, eat three mealworms, have a bath, then sit on my finger and carefully preen all his feathers. The results were not all that impressive; but he was methodical, and did his best, given the lack of proper parental example. Then he would stand on one leg and sing. And so it should be, it seems to me, with us. One morning I read this from Anselm, another great medieval spiritual writer:

*Come now, turn aside from your daily employment. Escape for a moment from the tumult of your thoughts, put aside your weighty cares. Let your burdensome distractions wait. Free yourself for a while for him. Enter the inner chamber of your soul. Shut out everything except God and that which will help you in seeking him. When you have shut the door, say to him: 'I seek your face. Lord my God, teach my heart where and how to seek you'.*

Anselm and the blue tit are of the same mind. I try to follow their example. Each morning I make myself a cup of tea, and take time to just lie and reflect, to attend to the feathers of my soul. I run my mind gently over each, smoothing, repairing, unruffling, fitting them for the day ahead. The results for me are not always that impressive either; some of my emotional and spiritual feathers hang loose, and others are just growing, still in their waxy sheaths. I don't always manage to smooth them into place. But usually I too can sing, as I think of the God who made me and made the world, who gives me life and offers it to me anew each morning.

We can all do that each day. Think about the birds you love, and wonder at the God who made them. Look at the sky, look at the clouds, look at the leaves on the trees, and wonder at your place in the universe. Look at the lakes and rivers which criss cross our country, and think of the Holy Spirit who pours the water of life into your soul. Use the natural world as a ladder – and see where it takes you. You might get some surprises – God is not as far away as you think. 

### about the writer

**The Revd Dr Alison Morgan** is ReSource's thinker and writer, and author of *The Wild Gospel*, *Praying with Creation* and other publications. Alison is a licensed bird ringer and currently part of the crane reintroduction project monitoring team with the RSPB in Somerset. Alison also took the three photographs that go with this article.