

Then, like lightning, it happened. I saw a scare go into the cloud of birds, and they opened their wings and began to rise up off the ground, and in that split second, from behind the house and from over my roof, a hawk came down like a bullet, and shot straight into the middle of the starlings just as they were getting off the ground. They rose into the air and there was a slight scuffle on the ground as the hawk got its talons into the one bird he had nailed. It was a terrible yet beautiful thing, that lightning flight, straight as an arrow, that killed the slowest starling . . .

(Thomas Merton Journals Vol 2. Feb 10th 1950)

*It's a terrible thing to fall in to the hands of the living God, to be a subject of his Word, to be captured by God's Spirit. When God makes his home with us, everything changes. It's a sort of death - that starling's going to be recycled as falcon, a carrier of God's word, to strike fear into all the other starlings. I've chosen this startling, starling imagery because we are now at a sufficient distance from the commodified Christ of Christmas to get a grip on the awfulness – the awe-fulness – of what has taken place, just as the Prologue to John's gospel, written at a distance from the life and death of Christ, is a profound reflection of the change it has made in the author's life. Whoever Christ was lives on now in other people's lives – recycled starlings living now as carriers of the same Word and identified by it. This is where our much talked of unity must come from. It's not about our being nice to one another necessarily – though that may happen – or necessarily living with people we like – though that may happen, too. It's much more about allowing ourselves to know and be known by this one Word made flesh. In this sense our common call as Christians is to be flesh made Word. Or, in the words of Rowan Williams meditating on our status as adopted children of God, able to cry out *Abba, Father*.*

Praying such a prayer, we are at one and the same time as totally dependent as a newborn child and as authoritatively free as an adult. The prayer tells us that a kinship is now established with the eternal Word, who enables us to say what he says to the Father; and this kinship is open to all, capable of being shared by all. This is the heart of our belonging together – the Spirit's gift of saying what the eternal Word says.

(*The Way of St Benedict*. p.60)

And note how radically levelling this Word is, making no distinctions between persons; as likely to strike and be present in a stranger as in you and me. So we must be open to the possibility of this presence everywhere for:

Through him all things came to be, not one thing had its being but through him. All that came to be had life in him And that life was the life of all people.

(Jn1:3-4)

Anyone can enlighten us. Anything can be used by God to re-create us in God's image. Our job is to be present to this process.

Perhaps this is indeed what monastic asceticism is ultimately all about: a specification of life and language, so that this one utterance can be spoken and heard as clearly as possible; the taking away of both chatter and rhetoric, both in life and in liturgy so that no one should be prevented from recognising the Word either by indulgent elaboration, or by any borrowing of the ways in which the world at large (or for that matter the Church at large) declares the presence of power or advantage.

(Rowan Williams. p.62)

Or, before this becomes too elaborate, to complete the quotation from Thomas Merton with which we began:

For a moment I envied the lords of the Middle Ages, who had their falcons and I thought of the Arabs with their fast horses, hawking on the desert's edge, and I also understood the terrible fact that some men love war. But in the end I think that the hawk is to be studied by saints and contemplatives because he knows his business. I wish I knew my business as well as he does.

P.S. Excuse the male language throughout but hold on to the idea that Wisdom is portrayed as female in our first reading from Ecclesiasticus.

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