

I'm using the occasional day off to conduct a bird census in an area of overgrown fallen-down farmland and it's thrilling, for me, to hear and see so many migrant birds returning to their territories from abroad, for many will be the very same birds that either bred or were raised here in previous years, fighting it out in song to claim mates and ward off rivals. The technical term for this seems to be site fidelity, with all sorts of evolutionary advantages, but a few downsides, too. And the wonder of it is both the noise (I sat between the sound of two nightingales the other day watching and hearing a Garden Warbler practising its first notes) and the ability of the birds to find their way back from sub-Saharan Africa. Thirty Redpoll, incidentally, were circling close overhead at almost the same time which shouldn't have been there but further north as they too are migrants, and come to us now mainly in winter, perhaps remaining because of the unusual period of northerly winds.

You can see where my real interest lies but there is a link, I hope, with what is being said in today's readings and the link is the word 'remain' or, better, 'abiding' or having 'site fidelity' in God: coming back to God from wherever, inspired and drawn by 'love' and, pushing the metaphor a little further, I wonder whether we can see much of the denominational divides which have arisen since, and perhaps inter-religious and even the religious-secular divide, as forms of sibling rivalry as we jostle for God's love (whether named or not). And something of this is going on here in the household of the Roman centurion Cornelius. Peter is prepared and prompted to come, in a vision, in which all creatures are shown to be acceptable to God, albeit in the form of food for us, and as the Spirit descends on this pagan household, Peter realises that all people are acceptable to God also.

The truth I have now come to realise is that God does not have favourites, but that anybody of any nationality who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to him.

The tricky point here is that there still seems to be a qualification for this blessing to take place and we see it also in the other readings:

Anyone who fails to love can never have known God for God is love

and:

If you keep my commandments you will remain in my love.

The perennial problem of what we have to do for God and what God does for us is, of course, the cause of much of the sibling rivalry that has taken place since. This competition to get what we think of as God's attention largely stems, perhaps, from our failure to realise that, whatever we do, God is attentive to us and that our problem is not God's attention but remaining in God's love, that is, realising that God's love for us never goes away.

This is a contemplative stance pondered here by the Cistercian monk, Thomas Merton:

Contemplative prayer is a deep interior activity in the very roots of our being in response to God who has the initiative and draws us into certain very subtle forms of obedient initiative on our own side. (Contemplation in a World of Action p. 361)

Obedient initiative, yes, that sounds right. We have to do something after all, but it may merely mean gathering together to eat or sitting still in a woodland clearing to let the birds do the rest, being present to God as God is present to us.

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