

There's a rumour going around that all Brother John is interested in is bird-watching – now there's some truth in this which could get me into trouble with my ecclesiastical superiors especially as, in the seventh chapter of the Rule of St Benedict, it says quite clearly:

‘The twelfth step in humility is when a monk always shows his humility to all who see him, not only by his own interior spirit but also by his outward behaviour. At the work of God, in the oratory, the monastery, the garden, on the road or in the fields, wherever he is, sitting, working or standing, there he is, head always bent, eyes fixed on the ground; reckoning all the time how guilty he is of sin’ (and there's lots more in similar vein).

You can see the conundrum I have this time, summed up in the words of a good friend of ours, another Benedictine monk, Dom Laurence Freeman:

‘ Reality is where you place your attention’.

Dom Laurence says this in regard to meditation but also more generally to whatever we do – meditation in a sense is a start in giving us a meditative and contemplative stance towards everything. For the monk that's also summarised perhaps in the idea of treating the tools in the garden as if they were the sacred vessels we use on the altar – everything done then with care and attention. Which means that the world matters after all, that something is going on in our attention to the world, or at least the details of the world that come our way, that matters, that somehow this attention is also attention to God. And I would like to suggest that something of this is going on in the passages we've just heard today which are not only about paying attention to God in the liturgy, but everywhere, for God pays attention to us in the smallest details too; encapsulated for us in the idea of incarnation – the coming to us of God in a body like our own as a child without power or prestige, in a place like Turvey, unexpected and largely unknown. And it happens because people like Mary and Joseph, Elisabeth and eventually Zacharia, pay attention not only to God but also to one another. Each of us is a revelation of God – if only we pay attention, which is also of course a way to love and a way of knowing what we want to do next.

Now all this has been said so I can come back to birds again and to the idea of many wrongs making a right in a flock of flying birds; I could quote Helen McDonald again on this but here it is in the words of another bird fanatic, Scott Weidensaul:

‘Think of it this way. Each of the dozens or hundreds of doves flying together in a flock can act like individual cells in a navigational brain. Each dove has an onboard compass to direct it, and each bird's directional sense is, to a greater or lesser degree, somewhat inaccurate. No-one's perfect but, by flying together, the doves average out their inaccuracies and arrive at a better, more precise collective decision than any one of them could produce alone. This is known as the “many wrong” theory (as in many wrongs make a right), and it's the same kind of wisdom-of-crowds effect that can, as was first noted in 1906, lead hundreds of English fair-goers to correctly guess the weight of an ox to within 1% of the actual figure, when all their guesses are averaged.’  
(p83 A World On The Wing)

The point being not so much the science as our need of one another to find our way to God.

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