

When Hitler was playing cat and mouse with the Christians of the Third Reich in the 1930s he had great success at first partly because he knew exactly how to play on their fears and hopes and divided loyalties and partly because Christianity itself can seem at times like a game of God playing cat and mouse with us – out to get us at times and at other times simply wanting to overwhelm us with love. The Day of the Lord then is a day of threat or a day when rescue finally comes. There is something of both senses in today's readings:

*Shout for joy, daughter of Zion (for) he will dance with shouts of joy for you as on a day at festival (Zeph 3:14, 18)*

*There is no need to worry ( Phil 4: 6 )*

*He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire (but) ... the chaff he will burn in a fire that will never go out.*

The problem of course is not with God but with us and our limited understanding of God, so it can become simply a game of us projecting our hopes and fears and divided loyalties on to God. This makes us peculiarly susceptible to such saviour figures as Hitler who:

*staged national socialism as a secular religion, presenting himself as a Messianic leader sent by the Almighty to deliver the German people from all evil' (p637 Hitler: Ascent 1889-1939 Volker Ullrich)*

Indeed as Hitler himself goes on to say:

*'We do not want to battle against Christianity – on the contrary we have to declare ourselves to be the only true Christians. (p650 ibid)*

He wasn't known as 'Wolf' for nothing.

So what this means for us, and particularly today on Gaudete Sunday, is that we have to somehow rise above the maelstrom of deceit and uncertainty which characterises so much of present living – we have to pray, we have to oriente ourselves, and there's a marvellous analogy to this once more in Helen McDonald's Vesper Flights, indeed it is in the story that gives the book its name, the story of swifts ascending and descending at dusk and dawn to monitor the weather and find their bearings above the connective boundary layer(at about 8000 feet) and all the noise and confusion below:

*'By flying to these heights swifts cannot only see the distant clouds of oncoming frontal systems on the twilight horizon, but use the wind itself to assess the possible future course of these systems. What they are doing is forecasting the weather. And they are doing more. During vesper flights they can see scattered patterns of the stars overhead, and at the same time they can calibrate their magnetic compasses, getting their bearings according to the light polarisation patterns that are strongest and clearest in twilight skies (and so on) ..What they are doing is flying so high they can work out exactly where they are, to know what they should do next. They are quietly, perfectly orienting themselves.'* (p162)

Gaudete Sunday then as a day to escape all the false messiahs who assail us below and find our true bearings.

Br John Mayhead  
Monastery of Christ Our Saviour