

Who would not want to see more clearly? To use an analogy from birdwatching – there is a marsh not far from my original home in Portsmouth which is an absolute Mecca for birds but I didn't know this as a child, or indeed until my mid-teens although I'd visited it as a cross-country runner several times. Indeed we used to run right through the centre of the nature reserve and, as I learned later, disturb thousands of roosting geese and waders with absolutely no idea we were doing so- we just didn't see them. And even as a birdwatcher in later years it took time to see them, or rather it took 'watchfulness' - a particular way of seeing to see them all and a particular way that takes practice and needs refreshing on every visit and it helps to have a good light and to organise ones walk in a way that the light serves – at Farlington usually in an anti clockwise manner which keeps the sun mostly behind . And slowly as the eyes get accustomed to the light and the ears to the various sounds and one begins to focus on this movement or that so the scenery and it's birds begin to make sense. And if one is prepared to persevere in this state of heightened awareness so every step becomes an adventure: first a Greenshank (not seen but heard) and then a party of Bearded Tits (not seen but heard), a solitary Dunlin among the hoards of Redshank, a Rock Pipit close enough to see the pale blue ring on its right leg, a Peregrine from the rear in menacing silhouette and the whole marsh takes off just as in the days when we used to be that peregrine, and so on. But this time we see the disturbance and hear the cacophony and can see our way through the new bewildering pattern of birds.

So although our Advent passages today can be seen in a largely negative light – the menace of God sorting us all out into good and bad, they can also be seen as an encouragement to see clearly and a warning that this needs to be done now- in the more positive light of God's grace while it's still to be had- there for us always as long as we live, only some see this and some don't, a division which goes back to our very beginnings. Here it is in the words once again of the Cloud of Unknowing as the author puzzles why some people find the words especially difficult, including scholars, and others do not.

'Many, nay most, will be unable, but some will hear and understand the words which are meaningless to others and it may even happen that when they read the Cloud the touch of grace will come.'

Our work then is not to prepare ourselves for the touch of God's condemnation but rather for the touch of God's grace. But be warned, when it comes, it can almost seem too much, and some indeed would prefer to stay in the dark. It's a way then of seeing.

Br John Mayhead

Monastery of Christ Our Saviour