

Job feels compelled to complain in today's reading, and with good reason. Paul feels compelled to preach, and with good reason. Jesus feels compelled to both heal and to escape the crowds, and with good reason. In purely behavioural terms we could understand all three in terms of fight or flee, and we all know that tension between when to be active and when to sleep - poor Job is caught in that terrible state of being unhappy in either situation, he might just as well be dead. Paul is more puzzling because in the context of the whole letter to the Corinthians he seems to be caught between boasting of his willingness to work without pay and yet his need for support, preaching then as both a joy and a burden. One feels at times that he could do with a few days off. Jesus is in no doubt that he needs time away both from his companions and from all the other people in pursuit of him, but readily surrenders his time of prayer, and of rest one assumes, for further activity - but again like Paul with a puzzling ambiguity in his motives, not allowing the devils he has cast out to reveal who he truly is and fleeing the crowds who are after him to go to other places - perhaps because they know him now as only a healer and have yet to know the full nature of messiahship.

All this perhaps comes down to an understanding of who God is and of what God demands of us: when to flee or when to fight.

On my way to my bed of pain yesterday - aka where the computer is and all the administration which I feel compelled to do - I heard Longtailed Tits in the branches above, there were three of them steadily working their way from one twig to the next in their search for food, two then flew off leaving one behind immediately in front of me, just a few feet away. I stood stock still waiting to see what would happen and this solitary bird, a few feet away, put its head under its wing and went to sleep, or so I assume, and remained like that for a couple of minutes. I never realised that birds 'cat-napped' in full daylight. It lifted its head briefly and then snucked down again for a further 30 seconds before suddenly starting up and heading off in the same direction as the other two. It wasn't long after lunch so it's a behaviour I can well understand but wonderful to see all the same. What was going on in its mind at that point, did it decide to sleep or allow instinct to take over?

And what's going on then for Job and Paul and Jesus and us as we decide between rest and activity at every moment of the day? What understanding of God do we have that motivates us to do this or that? Do we act out of fear or love? Have we confidence enough in the Lord to be as free as a bird in our waking or sleeping? as we pass briefly, in Bede's famous analogy, through this "warm, brightly lit noisy royal hall" from one darkness to another? All analogies limp but one feels the tension there between life as short and brutal and meaningless and life as precious and wonderful in all its brevity because sustained by a greater meaning than we can conjure up for ourselves, and more than that, a meaning we can live in out of fear - the God who will punish us if we fail to act, or a meaning that derives from God's love for us rather than our love for God. We have a choice, which the unthinking bird, one assumes, does not. Perhaps because it doesn't need to. I'm trying to work in here Therese of Lisieux's realisation that she has nothing to offer Jesus except her trust in his love. This is to allow the God who moves the stars to move us also.

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