

One of my favourite walks is to Hill Spinney and back. Abbey Park is always rewarding because of the mix of trees and pasture- there's usually a flock or two of something on the ground or in the trees – yesterday a flock of Redwing in subsong over in Grotto Plantation. But then it's out into the chemical desert of Grindstonehill where it's the carefully managed hedges that still hold out hope of finding something worthwhile. A visit in mid- January and another in early February produced very little- depressingly so and I went off on an interior rant about the hopelessness of it all. This the country with the most vibrant conservation movement in Europe – we have David Attenborough after all – and yet still the most deprived of all in terms of natural history , and not getting any better. But yesterday was very different. The same walk but now the hedges – or at least some of them, interestingly the best are those that run from east to west – were enlivened by a dozen or so species of bird with many in song; the first Yellowhammers and also a Chaffinch or two, several Dunnock and a Robin, a flock of seven male Reed Bunting – perhaps making the best of their bachelor status while they can. And so my mood shifted – a sort of resurrection really, no rainbow yet- it was still grey and murky but there was room now for hope. So we don't have far to go to experience desert and the interior struggle it makes space for – that emptiness which is such a challenge for us all as we fear to wait on God and try desperately to fill our lives with other possibilities – which may of course include bird watching, or birdwatching of a sort : that pursuit of the rare and exotic or the picture that's going to impress others on social media, or the research that's going to boost my academic credentials and so on. So it's about motivation and whether the drive into the desert, or Grindstonehill , is a response to the promptings of God's Spirit – an act of love, or of running away again out of self – interest.

There's been a car parked in Jack's Lane recently advertising All Souls Servicing and MOT – that's something of an archaic term now but I think it stands for the Ministry of Turning or re-turning to God in services like this; a prompt from the Holy Spirit driving us out into the desert of Lent, a time of self-emptying in order to receive. But there's a twist to this self emptying which was only brought home to me recently by the following quote from one of our foremost bird illustrators Lars Jonssen

*“ Every observation and attempt at a field identification has intrinsic conditions, possibilities and limitations. The person on familiar home territory often sums up probabilities and perhaps makes a reliable guess at a bird which to the uninitiated appears totally impossible to identify.*

*... One who knows his/her birds knows what to look for and therefore sees more.”*

Now when Jesus goes into the desert, or we go into the emptiness of our interior desert, this is not quite the same as a complete self emptying where the self is annihilated in the presence of God. No, we come to that experience with all our gifts and self knowledge, our total personality so far as it is formed and informed to that point – with the sort of knowledge that helps us recognise a desert for what it is, which equips us indeed for that desert and will also help us recognise resurrection when it comes, and the relief of the rainbow after rain. We are never a blank sheet but more like that battered old car that needs turning round to last a few more years, and hopefully fit to endure eternity. So perhaps MOT would be even better expressed as the Ministry of Turning or fine tuning for the life ahead.

Lent then as an opportunity to learn even more, to test our skills of observation. What is God telling us now?

*“One who knows God knows what to look for and therefore sees more. “*

Br John Mayhead

Monastery of Christ Our Saviour