

At the height of the COVID crisis – which of course is not really over – I had the chance to visit Strawberry Hill Farm, a few miles north of here, and explore an area of some 367 acres of land which had been set-aside for over 30 years. It was heaving with birds especially summer visitors such as Nightingale, Turtle Dove, Grasshopper Warbler, Whitethroat, Cuckoo and even on one occasion a Golden Oriole. I began a mapping exercise with notebook and later a proper map on a clipboard which immediately drew the attention of any passerby including two of the local farmers and resulted in some fascinating conversations. We'll take the second first because it ended in the most marvellous of questions. It went something like this:

*Where have all the Swallows gone, we used to have four pairs in my barn, and that hasn't changed?*

*Well, perhaps it's the lack of insects.*

*There's plenty of insects on my cattle.*

*When was the last time you had insects covering your windscreen?*

*Fair enough, but it's not the insecticides, we're not allowed to use them like we used to. It's the Africans netting them in Africa.*

*Well, that perhaps and deforestation in Africa, they've got nothing to go home for.*

*But this is their home, they nest here. Whose swallows are they?*

*Well, they spend six months there, and six months here.*

*Umh...*

What a good question. Whose swallows are they?

Or, just as well, - "Where is their home?" One could qualify every sentence above depending on what we mean by home. They're certainly at home in the air, indeed several months of the year are neither here nor there but spent travelling, but they're less at home now in the air because the insects are no longer there, in the air, to sustain them. And so on.

And where are we at home? We may think we are at home here in Turvey, or nearabouts, but Jesus has another tale to tell. Home can become a silo, a fortress where we are so comfortable that we no longer feel at home in the wider world, where it quickly becomes "us" against "them". When Jesus returns 'home' he can perform no miracles there because he's escaped the fortress, the silo, the gated community – sent like Isaiah and Paul into a wider world, so wide indeed that like Jesus they find that they have nowhere to lay their head, nowhere this side of death which they can truly call their home. The flip side to this is that, in this realisation they can be at home everywhere for they carry within them the seed of their true home in heaven, that homing instinct that returns us to our maker, the deeper reality beneath all 'homemaking' which separates those who know it from those who don't. The fact of it doesn't change though, whether we know it or not. To touch briefly on the conversation with the first farmer it ended with his wife pointing to their son's farm on a neighbouring hill and saying that from up there this whole area of set-aside, of scrub and grass, reminded her of the African Savannah. No wonder the summer birds all felt at home, and us too, also out of Africa, but even more so, out of God, our true beginning and end.

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