All Saints. 1.11.26

We live in a world which is more than we know and we are nearing the turn of the year when darkness takes a greater hold. The fields are bare now, the hedges cut, the ditches cleared – not a bird or insect in sight it seems. The threat of extinction looms. This is a pattern we can use each year and over the centuries to interpret life, to explain that sense of exile we sometimes feel when suffering comes or when others sin against us or the world itself sins against us or we sin. We have to see in a different way if we are to survive this dark time, we have to see with the attention of love. For a Christian Christ holds that possibility for us. This is what I think I mean: for years I've put off trying to understand the Book of Revelation, the language is too bizarre, too distant from the reality I am called to live each day – too apocalyptic. The fact that it is so readily applied to our situation today – apocalypse is everywhere, may say something about it's misuses, it's use as a metaphor of doom and coming darkness rather than as a confirmation of God's victory over evil and the coming of the light. This different way of seeing was brought home to me recently when I watched a flock of birds flying backwards. The usual reaction to this is one of disbelief – must have been drinking etc – but it happened and only gradually made sense to me, I had to think like a bird in order to understand.

It was the tail end of the time when our summer migrants return home. The day dawned cold and still, at least at ground level. Two martins flew west but above them there was a small scattered flock of other Martin's flickering their wings as they seemed to almost hover in the sky but as I watched they gradually moved backwards. I continued watching them as they passed over the garden with their heads facing westwards but moving east and getting higher to the point where I couldn't see them any more through my binoculars. Thinking about this I reasoned that their intention wasn't to fly west, at this point anyway, but to gain height – perhaps for safety above any predators, and there were no thermals at this time to help but only a light westerly breeze. So they were using the wind to gain height as they could only do this by facing into the wind even as it drove them backwards. It was all very counter-intuitive but demanded the sort of attention we need, to the world and one another, to understand what is really going on in these times of growing darkness: a way of seeing more deeply that produces saints, a way of seeing the Book of the Apocalypse and the Beatitudes not as a threat but as a possibility because Christ has already lived this reality for us. He is not asking us to do anything which he has not already done himself. So, as one person has said to me in response to hearing the story of the martins flying backwards – we may think we are getting nowhere, that all is doom and gloom, that our own sinfulness is an ultimate barrier, but God can be using such adverse winds to raise us higher. Don't worry about where you think you are, or where the world is, just keep facing into the wind and God will do the rest.

Br John Mayhead
Monastery of Christ Our Saviour