



A sermon for the Cathedral Eucharist at Wells Cathedral, preached on Sunday 2 August by the Reverend Dr Alison Morgan, Associate of The Mathetes Trust.

Prayer and Birds

The fourth in a series of sermons for the Year of Prayer at Wells Cathedral.

Readings: Psalm 104.1-24; John 1.29-34.

Introduction

It all started for me in 1983. I was on holiday in Devon, and I found myself sitting on a hillside, looking down on a panorama of distant fields, moors, and villages. I couldn't make out the details or tell what the people were doing as they got on with their lives down in the valley beneath me. But I was in reflective mood. A friend had died. She was a Christian. I wasn't. Think about it, she had said. I'd tried. I wasn't getting very far. Leaps of faith just isn't me.

As I sat, I noticed a buzzard soaring on a thermal above me. And it suddenly occurred to me that I would never be able to see the big picture in the way that the buzzard could, because I'm confined to the ground – but that God could see it, in every detail. And that he was actually telling me that. '*You can't see it, you can't make sense of it all; but I can. Trust me.*' Oh, I thought. Right. God was speaking to me; in a language I knew and in words I could actually see. God was speaking to me in bird.

And God said

It may sound odd to describe a bird as a word, much less as a language. But I'm not alone. Genesis tells us that when God created the world, he spoke it. *And God said. And God said. And God said.* God didn't speak words as we understand them, as sounds in the air or as marks on paper. God spoke words as reality. God spoke, and the world came into being. And long before he got going with you and me, Genesis tells us, God spoke birds.

Now at this point I must explain that by training I'm neither a theologian nor a scientist – although I am both an Anglican minister and a licensed bird ringer. By training I'm a linguist. So, I know what words are. Words are units of meaning. Words carry information, deliver instruction, express emotion. Words can be heard, and they can be written down; they don't become solid or fly about. So,

I can describe a blackbird, I can explain how to ring a blackbird, I can share with you how I feel when I hear a blackbird. But I certainly can't speak one.

It turns out that this is not how the authors of the Old Testament understood words at all. When they talk about the word of God, they use the word *dabar*. *Dabar* has two meanings: it means *word*, and it means *deed*. The word of God is both a word and an action. Fast forward to the gospel of John. He too insists creation is about words. He uses the Greek word *logos*, which also has two meanings: it's a spoken word, and it's the divine reason which orders the universe. *Logos* is both an utterance and a force. Come forward again to the 4th century and Jerome's translation of John's gospel into Latin. *In principio erat verbum* – in the beginning was the verb. What is a verb, children? A doing word! When God speaks, he's not just explaining something, he's *doing* something. Our information age leads us to completely devalue what a word is and what words can do.

Back to Genesis. What did God do once he'd finished speaking the world? He said to Adam, I've spoken these things. I want you to look at them carefully, and I want you to name them. God was inviting Adam into a conversation. And that's what he did for me. What began for me that day on the Devon hillside was a conversation. And the word Christians traditionally use for that conversation is prayer.

Hearing God

So, I became a Christian, then an Anglican minister. I have spent the last 25 years directing a discipleship programme for Africa called Rooted in Jesus. Each year I have been to a different Anglican diocese to train people to run small practical discipleship groups. One of our first conferences was held in Tanzania. We were teaching in a huge, barn like church. The first day was tough; people weren't very responsive. On the second morning our team prayers led us to **Psalm 84**:

· How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord!... Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars.

As we took our seats in the church, a swallow swooped in through the open door. She spent the entire morning flying back and forth from door to altar, where she had indeed built her nest. Oh, I thought, God is speaking: it's going to be OK. And it was: the atmosphere from then on was completely different. Since then, I have learned to ask for the bird. This is sticky, Lord. I need reassurance. Please send a bird. And always a bird, of one kind or another, has come. God speaks to me in bird. It's OK, Alison. My Spirit is here.

I have come to realise that a bird is a spoken word. A bird is a conversation. A bird is a prayer and an answer to prayer.

Talking to God

Now before you write me off as some kind of basket case, I'd like to remind you that the Bible's book of prayer is the Psalms, and that the psalmists also find that God speaks to them through birds. 23 psalms refer to 8 types of bird. It's hard to be sure of the exact species, as there was no formal classification of birds back then, and it's unlikely the psalmists had binoculars. But in the Psalms, we find owls, storks, swallows, eagles, sparrows, ravens, quails and doves – and they all play a part in the psalmists' prayers.¹

Think of **Psalm 102**. The psalmist is in distress. He wants to express his feelings to God, but he can't find the words. So he pours his emotions into the simple image of an owl: *I am like an owl of the wilderness, a little owl of the waste places. ... a lonely bird on the housetop*. An intensity of emotion packed into a single bird.

Or **Psalm 55**. The psalmist is in anguish. *O that I had the wings of a dove; I would flee far away*. This isn't a nice white dove, the kind Noah might have sent out as a text message from the Ark, or the kind which artists show over Jesus at the moment of his baptism. This is a wild rock dove, which nests in rocks and crags far from human habitation. The speed of its flight becomes a vehicle for the urgency of the psalmist's despair.

Or **Psalm 103**. The psalmist is full of praise. *Bless the Lord, O my soul*, he begins; *do not forget his benefits*. Listing them, he concludes: *He renews your strength like the eagle's*. Now eagles are astonishing. They have huge, powerful wings; they soar high on thermals for hours at a time. And their vision is extraordinary: they can't just read the bottom line of the chart; they can see in detail an object that is several miles away. How amazing is God, thinks the psalmist, that he can take our weak human nature and give us that kind of strength!² It's not a coincidence, perhaps, that the Middle Ages chose the eagle as a symbol of the far-sighted apostle John, or that the lectern, from which we preach the word that in the beginning created all things, is so often sculpted as an eagle.³ We've got one here.

So, I have learned that thoughts are not confined to the semantic units of human language. Thoughts can be heard and seen. A woodpecker laughs. It is saying something. A crane dances. It is saying something. A bird is not just using a

¹ See Psalms 8.8, 11.1, 17.8, 36.7, 50.11, 55.6, 57.1, 61.4, 63.7, 68.13, 74.19, 78.27, 79.2, 84.3, 91.4, 102.6, 103.5, 104.12&17, 105.40, 124.7, 139.9, 147.9, 148.10.

² See also Isaiah 40.31: 'Those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not faint.'

³ Jerome was the first to compare John to an eagle in his discussion of Ezekiel 1.10: 'the fourth [face represents] John the evangelist who, having taken up eagle's wings and hastening toward higher matters, discusses the Word of God' – Preface to his Commentary on Matthew. The image recurs in Revelation 4.7.

language that God has given it, it has become a language through which he speaks to me, and through which I may speak to him. I have come to recognise birds as the living components of my ongoing conversation with God.

When things catch fire

It turns out that some of the greatest exponents of prayer knew this. St Francis turned away from the power and pomp of world and church and looked to flowers and birds for the basis of his spirituality. Franciscan theologian Bonaventure turned this into a guide for prayer. Start, he advised, by meditating upon the creatures of the world. Learn to let them speak to you.⁴

Since then, many, many people have found that attending to the living words that God has spoken in creation pays dividends in our prayer lives.

John Lewis-Stempel tells how the soldiers of the First World War found strength and consolation in birdsong: 'There is something so extraordinary hanging in the air,' stammered Lance Corporal Alfred Vivian as he listened to a skylark, 'that I feel the thing I would most enjoy would be to visit a church.'⁵

Writer Rosamund Richardson dealt with betrayal by taking up bird-watching, welcoming birds as 'a kind of divine intervention'. She concluded, 'waiting for birds and watching birds, I'd picked myself up and realised how interconnected and part of a continuum we all are, and how beautiful and mysterious life is.'⁶

Theologians have coined a variety of words to express how this works. There is a 'thisness' in things which connects them to God, said theologian Duns Scotus in the thirteenth century; a 'quiddity', said CS Lewis in the twentieth. Poet Gerard Manley Hopkins invented the word 'inscape', by which he meant 'God's utterance of himself outside himself'; writer James Joyce talked about an epiphany, and Bishop John Taylor an annunciation. Whatever you call it, it's when things catch fire, and God becomes startlingly present to you through a single element of the world he has created. In my case, birds.

Writer Annie Dillard describes it like this:

'Sometimes God moves loudly, as if spinning to another place like ball lightning. ... Sometimes ... dazzlingly or dimly, he shows an edge of himself to souls who

⁴ *The Soul's Journey into God*, tr E Cousins, Paulist Press 1978.

⁵ *Where Poppies Blow – The British Soldier, Nature, The Great War*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson 2017, p49.

⁶ Rosamond Richardson, *Waiting for the Albino Dunnock – How birds can change your life*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson 2017, pp2, 319.

seek him, and the people who bear those souls, marvelling, know it, and see the skies carousing around them, and watch cells stream and multiply in green leaves. He does not give as the world gives; he leads invisibly over many years, or he wallops for thirty seconds at a time.’⁷

God has walloped me more times than I can tell you. Have you seen a flock of starlings dancing in the evening sky? A mass of diving gannets, hitting the sea at 60 miles an hour? A green-skinned egret chick staring yellow-eyed at you from its reedbed nest? Can you explain the raven, God demanded of the dissatisfied Job, the ostrich, the hawk, the eagle?⁸

A hundred years ago CH Dodd wondered why it was that Jesus too so often used illustrations from the natural world in his teaching. It surely wasn’t just that he hadn’t read any good books or seen any helpful films, but rather that these things point to fundamental spiritual realities. ‘There is no mere analogy, but an inward affinity, between the natural order and the spiritual order,’ Dodd said, echoing 18th century theologian Jonathan Edwards’ reflection that the physical order of the universe is a representation of the divine realities which underpin it.⁹ Gerard Manley Hopkins expressed this more succinctly: ‘The world is charged with the grandeur of God. It will flame out, like shining from shook foil.’¹⁰

Praying with creation today

So as God speaks to us through the world he has made, physical and spiritual reality blend into one. Ever since the creation of the world, we read in the letter to the Romans, *his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made.*¹¹ And if the natural world is a physical manifestation of a deeper spiritual world, we should expect to find that this language we call bird would not only draw us into deeper conversation with God, but that it would bring us into direct contact with his nature, his reality, his power. That through it we would find peace, restoration and healing. And in fact the wisdom of the psalmists, of Solomon, of the Book of Job and of Jesus himself in directing our attention to the birds of the air is confirmed not only by countless individuals, but by contemporary scientific research.¹² A whole

⁷ *For the Time Being*, Vintage Books 2000, pp167-68.

⁸ Job 38-39.

⁹ CH Dodd, *Parables of the Kingdom*, Fontana 1935, p21; Jonathan Edwards, *Images or Shadows of Divine Things*, ed P Miller, Yale University Press 1948, p44.

¹⁰ ‘God’s Grandeur’, *Gerard Manley Hopkins*.

¹¹ Romans 1.20

¹² Solomon – see 1 Kings 4.29-34. Job – see chapters 38 & 39. Jesus – see Matthew 10.29-31 & Luke 12.6-7.

host of recent studies confirms that the more time we spend in the natural environment, the healthier, both physically and emotionally, we become.¹³ They have even found that the more time we spend listening to birdsong, the happier we become.¹⁴ We, and the created world, are meant to be part of a whole web of being which owes its life and health to its connection with its Creator.

So – learn to pray with birds. Follow the example of the psalmists; take the advice of Jesus as you pray. Think about the sparrows that chatter in our hedges, and how God knows each one of them individually. Reflect on the crows and ravens which float over our hills and fields, and how the Lord provides for them. Think about the way hens protect their chicks in our farms and gardens, and how God cares for his people. Go to Africa and think of the arrival out of nowhere of a vulture when it scents food – and how Jesus himself will appear one day without warning.¹⁵ All these birds, Jesus says, tell us something about our relationship with God. Birds are not just things with feathers. Birds are living channels of communication.

For me, it all began with a buzzard.

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¹³ Research studies into the benefits of nature have been published by the universities of Exeter, Sheffield and Derby, Stanford, Duke and Michigan; reported in scientific journals and summarised in the popular media; and widely cited by organisations which focus on conservation, ecology and mental health. See for example *Health and the Natural Environment*, University of Exeter 2018, https://beyondgreenspace.net/2018/09/07/defra_health_review/.

¹⁴ No fewer than 5 recent studies on the health benefits of birdsong have been published in the last few years. See : E Stobbe et al, *Scientific Reports* 2022; R Hammoud et al, *Scientific Reports* 2022; RT Buxton et al, *Geography and Environment* 2023; C Randler et al, *Frontiers in Psychology* 2023; J Vanhoefen et al in *Landscape & Urban Planning* 2025.

¹⁵ Matthew 6 (birds of the air), Matthew 10 (sparrows), Matthew 23.37, 24.28 (hens & vultures), Luke 12 (ravens).

For further reflection

- Various prayer resources are available on www.alisonmorgan.co.uk, including a set of notes on Birds in the Psalms and a guide to Connecting with God through Birds. See also:
- Goodfellow, Peter: Birds of the Bible – A Guide for Bible Readers & Birdwatchers, John Beaufoy Publishing 2013
- Morgan, Alison: World Turned Upside Down: The Psalms & the Spirituality of Pain, BRF 2023 (available from the Cathedral bookshop)