

I suspect I'm not alone in noticing the birds a lot more during lockdown. Without traffic noise, birdsong was often all there was to hear. Driving on empty roads on pastoral work, I noticed how the pheasants had no fear of wondering along the carriage-way. Of course, as lockdown has eased, the birds again are having to compete with human activity. But they are still there; working at home, I see much more of the sparrows and the blackbirds in my garden; the buzzards at Kinlet seem particularly visible this year. How long before they will be joined by the red kites in the Corvedale? And my father has spent most of lockdown in his workshop making bird boxes; we now have one in the churchyard at Billingsley.

Writers from Biblical times onwards have seen something spiritual in birds; in their freedom and in their flight. A friend, ordained at the same time as myself, is Professor of Applied Ethnobiology and Conservation at Oxford University. In simple terms, he studies bird behaviour and evolution and this informs his faith. But you don't have to be scientist or a scholar to enjoy birds or to wonder at them. A few days ago, I came across this rather quirky prayer by the Australian poet Michael Leunig. The next time you get chance to watch any bird, give thanks to God for them and the way they enrich our lives and our planet.

*Dear God,  
We give thanks for birds. All types of birds.  
Small birds and large birds.  
Domestic fowl, migratory birds and birds of prey,  
hooting birds, whistling birds, shrikes,  
coloured parrots and dark darting wrens.  
Birds too numerous to mention.  
We pray for them all.*

*We mourn the loss of certain species  
and pray for the deliverance of endangered ones.  
We pray, too, for farm birds,  
that they may be released from cruelty and suffering.*

*We give thanks for eggs and feathers,  
for brave, cheerful songs in the morning  
and the wonderful haunting, night prayers of owls,  
... and all nocturnal fowl.*

*We praise the character of birds, their constancy,  
their desire for freedom, their flair for music and talent for flying.  
May we always marvel at the ability to fly.*

*Especially we praise their disregard for human hierarchy  
and the ease with which they leave their droppings  
on the heads of commoners or kings regardless.  
Grant them fair weather, fresh food and abundant materials  
for building their nests in spring.  
Provide them too with perches and roosts with pleasant aspects.*

*Dear God, guide our thoughts to the joy and beauty of birds.  
Feathered angels.  
May they always be above us.  
Amen!*