

Wonders

There are three things that are too amazing for me, four that I do not understand: the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a snake on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas, and the way of a man with a maiden. – Proverbs 30:18-19

The Way of an Eagle

Meditations

Terror

Have you ever seen an eagle, in real life? In the wild? They aren't the same on a TV screen, not even in the cinema – not even in a zoo. Do they touch you? Do they bring to you a picture of wonder, of effortless flight, of nobility – of royalty even – of power and terror and beauty? Terror and beauty. Now there's an alien combination – or rather, an archaic combination. We could never put them together today; we can no longer imagine how killing can be beautiful, death can be beautiful. We have forgotten the joy of battle; we shrivel in disgust at the glorying heroes of the old tales, of Cuchulain, of Percy, of Horatio, of Roland. Only in despised computer games, in the cartoons padding out Saturday television, in fantasy books condemned in our pulpits and sneered at by serious critics, in the trashy films of Lara Croft and Indiana Jones and Luke Skywalker, only there still are hidden glimpses of that archaic beauty. And the censors that grip our free society ever tighter would wrinkle it out even there. Are they right? Is killing always evil and disgusting? Is death always without dignity, always without beauty? Has the eagle finally been stripped of her majesty and wonder? Don't answer now. Go and stand in a Scottish glen, watch her float out on the wind, watch her quartering a square mile of heather as though it was a back garden, watch her drop, snatch a hare from the rocks and lift it to her feeding place all in one perfect curve. Then answer the question – is there still beauty, is there still glory, is there still wonder in the way of an eagle?

Flight

It's an ancient dream, flight. To be free as a bird, we say, free to fly, to leave behind this earthbound life, to climb to the sky and beyond. We've come close; first kites, then balloons, then gliders, then aeroplanes, then microlights, then... well, who knows what's next. We've come close to our dream of effortlessly soaring up and away, without weight, without ties to the dull ground, without fear, just like a bird.

No, well, no. Not like a real bird. No bird flies effortlessly. Most animals have bodies designed for, dominated by two things: food and sex. But a bird's body is dominated by flight; food and sex come a poor second. Birds foul their own roosts because their gut is too short to hold their excrement. They are forbidden by the weight to grow teeth, instead they swallow tiny stones to grind their food in their – too small – gizzards. They lay their eggs at the earliest possible moment, like the most primitive lizards, to get rid of their weight. The simple act of flapping the wings fast enough to fly uses so much power that the lungs, heart, blood vessels, are all massively overdeveloped to supply the desperately starved muscles. Not effortless, no.

There are two lessons that preachers have drawn from all this. The first – the well-known one – is this: that if you want to fly spiritually, then your spirit must be dominated by flight; that we must cast off the control of mere animal desires – food, sex, whatever – and be controlled only by the spirit, by the need to fly. And that is true. But let us also draw the second lesson too: that even though something else seems to embody our dream, it is not so. Even though someone else may seem to have won exactly what we still long for, still yearn for, still dream of, it is not so. Our dream is given to us alone, and only we can reach it. God has given each of us a white stone, and on each stone is written a word, and only we can ever read it.

Prayers

For Wings

Lord, you have promised us that if we wait on you we shall soar like eagles. Grant us eagle's wings, Lord that we may soar closer to your heaven; but grant us also eagle's eyes, that we may still see the work you have appointed to us.

For Perception

Lord Jesus Christ, who overturned the money changers' tables, who walked away from the angry crowd, and who allowed the priests to crucify you, teach us when to use our talons, when to use our wings, and when to bow our necks. Amen

A Few More Thoughts on the Way of an Eagle

I remember my first eagle. I was a very new birder. I had seen buzzards before, of course, and I had almost mistaken one or two of them for eagles, so I read all the guides carefully and memorised all the distinguishing features. Then I saw her, floating around a crag above Glen Coe, and I knew her instantly for an eagle – I didn't need to check the lengths of the primary feathers, or the proportions of the neck against the forewing. I knew.

She glided almost casually out from the rocks until her golden head shone in the pale Scottish sunlight, and then she paused, circling gently in midair. Suddenly a second eagle, maybe a shade smaller, dropped from nowhere in a swooping dive as if he meant to crash into her. Almost at the last moment she flipped over on her back, reaching out with her talons, and he tossed a gift of food into them. They flew off down the glen, dancing together on the wind.

Yes, I remember my first eagle. Like my first love, like my first prayer – I will never forget it – never.

The Way of a Snake

Meditations

The Enemy

The snake on the rock. You can see it, can't you – a wide, flat sheet of rock, baking in the Mediterranean sun. Tumbled coils thrown casually across in a long thick heavy tangle, with a wide flat head motionless at one side. All is still.

Then – a little flicker, a forked tongue darts out and in, out and in. The head lifts, just a fingerbreadth, leaving a deep shadow on the burning yellow rock. The tongue flickers again. Then the snake moves – but it doesn't straighten, it doesn't uncoil, it flows along its own length, following its own twists and turns, so that the pattern seems to melt away, loop by loop. Now the snake is moving freely, rippling across the rock, its body bending to every little lump and pock mark, seeming to pour across the rock as metal pours from a crucible into a mould.

It reaches the edge, by the tussocks of dry grass, and pauses again. The tongue flickers out and in, out and in. The grass hardly rustles as the great body flows between the stems and out of sight.

You breathe a sigh of relief. The enemy, the poison toothed menace has gone. All is well. Or is it? Before, you at least knew where it was. Now it could be anywhere, behind any pebble, It could be pouring out towards you through the grass even now – and you wouldn't know. It could be behind any word, under any action, the smallest thought could hide it. You'd better step back – or is it behind you? Dare you move? Must you stay frozen, terrified of the slightest change of wind, terrified of every new movement, every new idea, every new chance, terrified of moving, terrified of growth, terrified of life? If you move it might see you, if you stay still it might slither onto your foot, up your ankle, your leg, your knee... Dare you move?

Sssssshh...

Beauty

You can read in many books just how the snake's body works, how it achieves that wonderful pouring action, how it moves over the rock without seeming to do anything. But isn't the wonder of the moment enough in itself? Do you really gain anything by knowing how?

As a matter of fact, yes you do. You gain even more wonder. The way a snake moves is wonderfully simple, wonderfully conceived, wonderfully precise. Even when you know how it works you still want to watch it – no, you want to watch it even more. In fact, especially when you know how it works, you want to watch it even more.

With so many human things, they are wonderful when you first see them, but lose that wonder as soon as you take them apart, as soon as you begin to understand them. Not so with God's works. They are wonderful when you first see them, and gain in wonder the more you know, the deeper you get.

Prayers

For Alertness

Lord, when my heart is jumping for joy, remind me to look for the sorrow
Lord, when my heart is cloaked in sorrow, remind me to look for the joy
Lord, when my heart is distracted, remind me to look for you.
Amen

A Few More Thoughts on the Way of a Snake

Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. Isn't 'subtil' a lovely word? A devious, manipulative word, a Uriah Heep of a word, much better than 'subtle', rhyming with coal-scuttle, and about as evocative.

The serpent's motion is so unbelievable, so simple, so subtil that it takes the breath away. So simply imagined, so purely performed, so seemingly effortless, its beauty is indeed too difficult for me.

As a metaphor, the snake has really had a bad press – it's the fangs that do it, of course. First, the snake in the grass – it can hide where there seems no hiding place, and strike when you least expect it – just like sin. Second, the beautiful snake – don't judge by appearances! Third, the simple snake – a snake moves as if without moving, without complicated limbs – so sin is so often very simple: I saw what I wanted and I took it.

Remember, though, that this is not just any old nasty snake: this is a snake on a rock, a snake where you can see it, a snake where you can admire it, a snake which is least likely to harm you. A snake you can take time to wonder at without fear.

The Way of a Ship

Meditations

Departure

The ropes are thrown off the bollards. The gangways vanish. Suddenly there is a gulf between the ship and the shore, a gulf no hand can reach across. A final shouted goodbye, a wave, a blown kiss, and the ship turns its slow back to the land, and begins its inevitable slide to the horizon.

One day I shall set sail, too. A last handclench to say goodbye, then my grip on the world will slacken and fail, the eyes fade, the senses cloud, and I too shall turn my back on the land I know, and begin my final voyage to the horizon. And what harbour my poor boat will make, and what hands will make fast my ropes and reach me ashore, no tale yet tells.

On the sea

Children's tales always forget the noise of the sea. You expect silence, out there on the wide ocean, no land in sight, but instead you are wrapped in noise. Engine noise, of course, but that is in our control; we can stop engines if we wish. The waves lapping – lapping! Thumping more like, or sluicing.

Sluicing against the sides of the boat. The wind fluting in every pipe and handrail, strumming every rope, every wire, roaring even in our ears. The plaintive, threatening screams of the gulls, the scuttering of auks and puffins across the waves, the smash of a gannet into a shoal of fish.

Under it all, forgotten in the cacophony of little loud noises, the steady sea surge, regular as breathing, deep as breathing, normal as breathing, but filling every corner of sound and silence with its own powerful voice. After five minutes on the sea you no longer notice it; however far you travel inland you never cease to feel it.

An old sailor once told me that when you've once been to sea, you can never truly come to land again.

How strange of John to write in his Revelation that there would be no more sea. The physical seas may be gone, but the spiritual sea, that surging sea that breathes through every corner of our spirits with its own powerful voice, how can that cease to fill us?

Prayers

A Few More Thoughts on the Way of a Ship

It doesn't mean the mechanics of sails and turbines and rudders and charts. It means seeing that ship sailing off across the sea over the horizon, out of sight of land, out of touch with help or rescue, hoping to make its port safely. And then to do it again; to come back.

In our day of radio, radar, GPS and rescue helicopters we don't feel quite the same about an ordinary container ship or oil tanker sailing off, although maybe there is still a little quiver of wonder even with them. The first of the round-the-world solo sailors recaptured a little of that antique awe, but even that has become mundane, boring, safe.

The closest we get is at Cape Canaveral, or its Russian or Chinese equivalents. There we still see people committing themselves to a dangerous ship, in real peril, in order to go off into the unknown. Men and women have died doing it, and many more will die, before it is as mundane as a ship sailing on the sea.

The Way of a Man with a Maid

Meditations

Prayers

A Few More Thoughts on the Way of a Man with a Maid

You want a description? With diagrams? Coloured pictures?

Get lost, and grow up.

But there's more to the way of a man with a maid than four bare legs in a bed. For a start, so little is defined – as a recent President of the United States discovered, we can't even agree on what sex is. And marriage is even harder to define. It isn't surprising that so many Christians have given up, and simply defined marriage by the marriage certificate – as if paying an atheist civil servant £2.50 decides whether an action is sinful or not!

Some Final Thoughts on Wonders

They are too wonderful for me, as well. Oh, yes, I know the physics of flight, I know how a snake moves, I know the forces that drive a ship, I know about hormones and pheromones and selfish genes and evolutionary imperatives – they aren't the point. The point is that these things make me catch my breath, make me stop and look, make me shake my head in wonder.

Perhaps for you they don't. Or perhaps some do and some don't. Or maybe you want to add to the list – I do. A falcon stooping; the long slow back of a breaching whale; Concorde; Avebury Rings; Handel's Messiah. But I can't imagine anyone not feeling the wonder of the way of a man with a maid.

Sometimes it is tempting to say, with the author of Psalm 131, that these things are too wonderful for me; I will not concern myself with such great matters. Sometimes that is right – after all, there is no need for more. But sometimes we are asked to look closer, to look deeper, for our gain. So here.