

The danger

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SOME WEEKS AGO I was sitting working in my office in an upstairs room at home when I heard an unusual birdsong. It was bubbling and cheerful, rising and falling in delightfully liquid musical phrases. I got up from my desk and went over to the window that looks out over the garden to see what it was that was producing such a song. It was a canary; a beautiful, bright, lemon-yellow canary, no doubt recently escaped from an aviary not too far away, singing its heart out in its new-found freedom.

I ran downstairs and out into the garden to get a better view and to hear the song more clearly. The sun was shining and the air warm, and the spring blossom was abundant. The apple tree was snowy with white flowers and pink buds, and the ground below it blue with forget-me-nots, mirroring the cloudless sky. It was then that I realised that the canary was not alone. There were two; the other with some black patches among the yellow, making it more camouflaged and difficult to see.

But contrasted with the pretty song of the canaries came another sound: the insistent, harsh cries of black-backed gulls high in the sky. They drew my attention, and I looked up to see the cause of their mewling. There was another, slightly smaller, shape with them, the blunt-winged, long-tailed silhouette of a sparrowhawk slowly circling round, climbing higher on the thermals. The mobbing gulls caused it to move on, but not before it had had a chance to see the bright yellow shapes of the canaries far below. It would be back . . .

Other small birds disappeared from the garden, alerted to the danger by the cries of the gulls; but not the canaries. They moved onto the garage roof and remained there, continuing to sing, unaware of the threat. I returned to the house, but sat by the window awhile to listen and to watch.

I was right. Barely five minutes had passed before a silent grey-brown shadow came streaking along the length of the garage, just below the roof. Then quickly up, and over, and it was gone. So too was the brightest of the canaries. The sparrowhawk had taken it. The other sat bemused, its carefree song now silent, its companion gone.

How long it stayed there I do not know. My coffee break over, I returned to my desk to work. Sometime later I looked out into the garden, but there was no sign of the lone canary. I have no doubt the predator had returned once more, finding easy prey for her growing nestlings.

There's an important spiritual lesson for us here; to get to know the danger, and to heed the warnings. The canaries had been in captivity all their lives; they did not know that a sparrowhawk is dangerous; they did not understand the gulls' warning. Other birds had heard the gulls, had looked into the sky and seen the threatening shape and hurried to hide. So, too, "A prudent man foreseeth the evil, and hideth himself: but the simple pass on, and are punished" (Prov. 22:3).

For us, too, there is a warning: "Doth not wisdom cry? and understanding put forth her voice? She standeth in the top of high places, by the way in the places of the paths. She crieth at the gates, at the entry of the city, at the coming in at the doors . . . O ye simple, understand wisdom: and, ye fools, be ye of an understanding heart . . . Forsake the foolish, and live; and go in the way of understanding" (8:1-3,5; 9:6). The call is insistent, urgent. Get to know the danger; heed the warning message of the Scriptures about the deceitfulness of sin.

The simple young man in Proverbs is drawn by the wiles of the foolish woman. "But he does not know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of Sheol" (9:18, RSV). He does not know. The people of Noah's day "knew not until the flood came, and took them all away" (Mt. 24:39); they were "eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noe entered into the ark", enjoying a life of freedom and opportunity; and that day came on them unawares, as a snare.

We have no excuse for not knowing the danger. "Ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief" writes the Apostle Paul. "Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober" (1 Thess. 5:4-6). The message is especially urgent for us in these last days before the Lord's return.