

swallows & amazons



I FIRST BEGAN WRITING this at Christmas time, but we are in a different world now. My original introduction was about the most popular Christmas presents in 2019: gin glasses, drones, AirPods, Echo Dots and scented candles.

COVID-19 has changed lives dramatically since then; I doubt these luxuries would top Amazon lists now. Maybe we would prioritise loo roll, soap, baked beans, a new thermometer. The post-corona wish jar suggested on home schooling websites now seem more appropriate than gift lists. Current wishes might be: returning to school, hugging a grandparent, meeting a friend for coffee. Simpler, less materialistic things.

My husband arranged the retreat for me as a Christmas gift after noticing how much I love reading a particular set of daily Bible notes. The author of those notes and his wife run days of reflection and prayer in their home and they were holding an Advent one.

I didn't really know what to expect when I arrived and introduced myself to my hosts and the other guests. The advertisement had said we would be seeking God's announcement for each of us for Christmas and beyond. I was puzzled about how I would hear it. We began by individually pondering a painting of Mary being told that she would become the mother of God's son. When we shared our ideas, I was most fascinated by a tiny swallow sitting above Mary. We learnt it was a reference to Psalm 84:3, which speaks of a swallow making her nest near God's altar. I was struck by this imagery.

I believe God has whispered to me before through the symbolism of birds. One stand-out moment was when we were packing up to move overseas and a woman I barely knew rang me. She'd driven past some trees stripped of their leaves by winter, their nests exposed, and she'd sensed I felt my nest was being exposed, about to be shaken. She reassured me that it would stay secure. There was such sweet comfort in those words as the challenges of moving created chaos all about us.

When I was on my retreat, I anticipated that 2020 would be full of the unexpected for our family with another international move back to the U.K. on the cards. I had so many concerns. We didn't know when or where we would move, where to apply for schools or how it would all fit together with my husband's 6-month tour overseas without us at the end of the summer.

And then the Coronavirus drove across all our plans, not just our personal ones but the whole world's. None of us ever know what the future holds but we like to think we do and it is, at best, uncomfortable and, at worst, traumatic to come face to face with the fact that we actually never have ultimate control over our lives.

After studying the painting, we were invited to go and find a quiet corner of the house to reflect and pray. I was unsure what to do so I decided to copy out Psalm 84. As I wrote the verse about the swallow, I sensed that earlier promise being repeated: your nest may be shaken but it will stay secure. Were these just my own imaginings? Does God still speak to us? Has He

ever? As I looked up from my writing, I noticed a tree in the corner of the room. It was bare of leaves, a skeleton painted white, its tips tiny fairy lights. A Christmas tree without needles. At the top, there were two birds nestled together.

Was this me and Jack, I wondered? At the bottom of the tree, there was a robin in its own tree, hanging from the main tree. Maybe our daughter, who recently started boarding school, now in her own world and yet still part of ours. I looked for our boys. There were two more birds, the same design, on different branches. There was only one other bird in the tree, silver, bigger than the rest, magnificent in size and appearance compared with the other smaller wooden ones.

I concluded this was Jesus and I realised it was no accident that this tree was in my line of vision when I wanted God to speak and bring reassurance. I read one of the other decorations: 'Merry Christmas Katie' said one of the baubles (my hosts' daughter name, like mine). In that sitting room, by that tree, I heard God tell me again that my nest may be shaken but it will remain secure. I heard Him encourage me to keep making my home by His altar, to keep raising my young in its safety, like that swallow with her nest. And I received Psalm 84 as a promise of all the blessings He has in store if I trust Him with my home, my family and my future.

• **Katie Kyle is married to Jack, an RAF Chinook helicopter pilot. They are currently posted abroad with their three children.**

You can read more from Katie on her blog: www.eagletswings.co.uk