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## THE WELCOME SWALLOW

*Pastor Trevor Keller*

We recently spent a couple of weeks holidaying in Cairns. One of the highlights was a trip out to Kuranda on the Sky Rail and then the return by train. In-between our arrival and return trips we had several hours to wander around Kuranda. We enjoyed looking around but after a while, feeling a bit tired, we wandered down to the river to find a quiet spot. It was beautiful just to sit and gaze out upon the water edged by the steep tropical rain forest. Truly restful and refreshing.

We hadn't been there that long when we noticed a small boat by our landing waiting to head out on what a notice said was an hourly trip out on the river. I suggested to Cheryl that a boat trip might be just the thing to relax and refresh our lagging spirits. She wasn't sure so we ummed and aahhd for a while. Just as the boat was preparing to leave we decided, yes we would do it. As we settled on the boat we noticed a beautiful red breasted swallow flying around. He would sit out on the front of the boat and then fly back and hop around on the rails near each of the passengers and then fly out and sit on the front of the boat again.

As we were about to leave the skipper of the boat welcomed us by telling us that this was the welcome swallow. We were told that the swallow lived on the boat, actually had a nest with some babies up in the rafters of the boat and always excitedly flew around acting as the perfect hostess or welcoming party. As we headed out from the landing the swallow flew ahead of us leading the way. When we came to a group of ducks the Swallow flew out over them to show us the ducks. The same happened with some turtles. When the skipper pointed out a freshwater crocodile sunning itself on the bank, the welcome swallow flew out over the crocodile to act as the skipper's pointer. It was the most marvelous hour. An hour during which we were introduced to new experiences and in which we made new discoveries. And the swallow stayed with us all the way. In fact as we headed into the landing at the end of the trip the swallow flew ahead and landed on the rail showing us the way but welcoming us back to the shore and wishing us well as we left.

It was a fantastic trip. A highlight of our holidays. But the most incredible and heartwarming thing was the welcome swallow. In fact the welcome swallow changed our attitude from being tired, perhaps a bit grumpy and heading out with the thought that this would be just another trip, to an attitude of happiness and wonder. Feeling good about ourselves and seeing life and the world in a different light.

Another thing that happened was that the swallow actually brought all those on the boat into a closer relationship with each other. At the beginning, all of the passengers were sticking to themselves, talking to those they came onboard with. But by the end of the trip we were all talking to each other about this incredible bird that had brought a smile to all of our faces and warmth to our hearts. The welcome swallow. What a difference it made to our day.

As we travelled back down the mountain to Cairns on the train we chatted about this amazing experience. It reminded us of another friend that we have. A warm and welcoming friend who is always with us. Who goes ahead of us on our journey of life, showing us the way, highlighting the wonders and beauty we see each day around us. Leading us to new discoveries and new experiences. Introducing us to new acquaintances and bonding us in new relationships. This is the welcoming friend who promises to lead us in green pastures and besides still waters. In fact, he also promises to relieve us of our worries and their concerns and to put a smile back on our faces and a song in our hearts. In fact, he gives us back our lives. He restores our soul. He promises to provide for all our needs. Says that he knows all about us, even the number of hairs we have on our head. And he's there for us when we mess up our relationships or say something to someone we wish we hadn't said. He's the one who promises to help us sort out things and give us the courage to ask for forgiveness for what we've done. In fact he is a master of forgiveness. He put his whole life into mastering it so he gives it freely to us so that we can in turn give it freely to others.

As we chatted on the way back to Cairns our hearts were almost singing with delight. The welcome swallow had been marvelous but we came to realize that the swallow had done something even more wonderful. The swallows one last gift to us was bringing to mind the best friend we've ever known. His name is Jesus who once claimed to be not a swallow but a shepherd. He once said I am the Good Shepherd. I care for my people like a shepherd cares for his sheep. They know me and follow me and I give them new life which will last forever. We were fascinated by that wonderful welcome swallow and our journey together lasted only for an hour. However our best friend Jesus is there always, 24/7. He's there as another year comes to an end and he will be there for us as the new year begins. The truly marvelous thing is that he promises that at the end of our journey through life, he'll be there waiting with open arms to welcome us as we come into the landing. Ushering us into a brand new life. How wonderful is that. The welcoming arms of Jesus for you and for me, now and forever.

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