

Sermon on Sunday 17 October 2021

by Geoff Oates, Lay Reader

Isaiah 53 v 4: *"We are healed by the punishment he suffered, made whole by the wounds he received."*

When I am confronted by difficult theology, my first instinct is to tell a story. Because stories don't have to give you all the answers. This one is **The Rag and Bone Man** by Margaret Silf. I'm sure some of you will know it.

"In the early hours of a Friday morning, I was walking home through the centre of town. Ahead of me I spotted the figure of a man walking towards me pulling an old cart. It was a rag and bone man. As he walked past me, he looked over and smiled.

There was something about that smile that made me want to follow him, find out what a rag and bone man did at this ungodly hour of the day.

The rag and bone man set off along the high street, pulling his old cart behind him and shouting out in a loud voice, 'Old for new, give me your old, I'll give you my new'.

Ahead of us sitting on the pavement I noticed a young woman, sobbing, crying a thousand tears into an old handkerchief. The rag and bone man went over to her. I couldn't hear what he said but he managed gently to take

the old hankie from her trembling hands, and from his cart he gave her a fresh new one, and then off he went: 'Old for new, give me your old, I'll give you my new'.

As I passed the young woman, I noticed that she was no longer crying, in fact there were even the first traces of a smile. Instead the tears were now flowing from the eyes of the rag and bone man.

Further down the road, an older lady, a victim of some kind of accident or assault, was standing holding her head in her hands, and from a makeshift bandage drops of blood were dripping down her face. Gently and carefully the rag and bone man approached her, removed the bandage and put it on his own head. And from his cart he took a new clean bandage and carefully dressed the woman's wound.

And off he went: 'Old for new, give me your old, I'll give you my new'.

I saw that the bleeding from the woman's head had stopped, and instead, now the rag and bone man was bleeding from the bandage on his head.

The last person he met that morning was a young man standing on a street corner. The rag and bone man approached the young man and I heard him ask, 'Not working today?'

The young man turned around and I could see that he had only one arm. 'Who would employ me?' After some

negotiation, the rag and bone man persuaded the young man to replace his old jacket with a new one from the cart. Into the first sleeve of the jacket the young man pushed his arm, and then into the other... another arm.

The rag and bone man had set off again with his cart, this time desperately trying to pull with only one arm, the blood and the tears trailing down his face, out of town and towards the refuse dump. I followed him.

Into the dump he went and leaving his cart, he climbed to the top of the biggest pile of rubbish. I clambered after him, my feet sinking and my hands scratched to pieces until I reached the top. But where was he? And then I saw him, his dead body lying face down, overwhelmed by the tears and the bleeding and the pain. I sank to my knees and from somewhere inside me I began to sob. I lay on the ground and fell into the deepest, saddest sleep.

When I awoke, it must have been something like three days later. I looked for him, but he wasn't there. I stood up and then I noticed that I wasn't alone. Someone else was standing there, someone who looked like a king. I opened my mouth to ask him if he knew where the rag and bone man's body was, but before I could, he smiled. A smile I recognised.

And there and then I wanted to take off the rags I was wearing in exchange for what he had.

'Old for new, give me your old, I'll give you my new.'"

When I am confronted by difficult theology, my first instinct is to tell a story. Stories don't have to give all the answers.

2,500 years ago a wise man, not the Isaiah of 8th Century Israel, but one who walked faithfully in his footsteps, tried to make some sense of the calamitous events that befell his people. Defeat in war, destruction of their homeland, oppression, injustice, deportation and exile in Babylon – and all this for a people who thought they were the chosen people of a mighty God. He wrote a story, or perhaps rather a series of poems that we call the 'Servant Songs', and we heard the last of them as our Old Testament reading. Songs of an unnamed man known simply as 'the Servant' – we also know him as 'the Man of Sorrows'.

The servant suffers terrible injustices and undeserved punishments, and accepts them silently and passively. The poems affirm that God has not abandoned his people, he is still present and active in their crisis. In spite of it all, God is still in charge of his world, and one day the Servant will be honoured and rewarded. The story doesn't give all the answers – that's not what stories are meant to do.

I have little doubt that Jesus was thinking of Isaiah's Servant figure when he spoke of the Cup of Suffering, and explained to James and John the true meaning of his mission. Service and sacrifice, not power and privilege.

Just a few days after the incident in Mark's Gospel, Jesus told his own story about serving. He didn't use words; he used a bowl of water and a towel to teach the same message to the rest of his disciples – service, not power. I am sure the words of Isaiah were in his mind in the Upper Room that Passover night.

In this past week, the Lockdown Exhibitions at St Mary's and St Andrew's have also been telling a story. A story we have tried to share, both in the telling and the listening, with those both within and outside our congregations. A story that has been told by many voices, with far more than just words. Those are often the best stories; they speak to our imaginations.

Stories about suffering and loss in varying degrees, stories of illness, grief and bereavement. Stories of frustration and disappointment. Stories of stress and exhaustion, and, yes, of exile. Exile from the homes of relatives and friends, from colleagues and places we work, from places we relax and have fun.

Sufferings mostly borne with humour, optimism and patience – that's the way we do things in England. But above all, suffering shared. A time that has taught us of the great need we have to be servants one to another. A time when we can still claim that a loving God stands by us.

They are not stories that pretend to give us all the answers. That is not what stories do. But they are authentic, they are ours, they are shared in faith and honesty, and I trust that they have brought us grace and healing.

For all of God's stories, and for all of our stories, thanks be to God.

