

Sermon at St Andrew's and St Mary's on Sunday 19 June 2022

by Maria Henriksson-Bell, Lay Leader of Worship

(Readings: Isaiah 65. 1-9 & Luke 8. 26-39)

I was quick to praise the Lord when my runner bean plants came up strong and healthy, quickly stretching out their leaves in what always looks to me like an act of worship towards their maker and towards their benefactor, the sun.

I was less happy when irregular weather made them susceptible to aphids. Lots of aphids. Within days the lush green plants were significantly stunted in their growth and after the mice and the pigeons had had a nibble too, my formerly fabulous runner beans looked rather sorry for themselves.

This was a test of my faith. If I hold to be true the principle of the created world being good, where was the good in my runner beans being decimated? Aristotle put it well when he said, "In all things of nature there is something of the marvellous."

The scientists and naturalists among us recognise, of course, that several species up the food chain, from aphid to red kite, may have benefitted from my runner beans getting eaten, in a beautiful, if sometimes cruel, system.

It was a reminder that while we often labour and garden under the foolish idea that we are actually in control, we

are in many natural systems and to many other species not at all important. This makes it even more remarkable that the God who cares for the sparrow also cares for us.

Of course, I recognise that this is a small, frivolous story and test of my faith, but were I to tell the stories that have tested my faith more seriously, this talk would quickly go very dark and possibly come with trigger warnings. Maybe one day.

It does seem to me that the world is very dense with stories. Many of them started on the 24th of February this year (2022). When the latest Russian invasion of Ukraine began, I was on holiday in the Lake District and our lazy existence, sauntering from indoor pool to fell to tea room, couldn't have been more of a contrast to what we saw play out on the news.

At first I was numb with shock, then appalled at man's inhumanity to man and fearful for the world when yet another leader proved himself unhinged and dangerous. Awareness that this eruption of violence was not the first in recent times threw up questions, too: Had we cared this much during conflicts recent, but further away? Why or why not?

And I am sure I was not alone in feeling almost guilty about my comfortable existence. On the third day, I nevertheless lay in a warm bed, listening to the silence, reminiscing about the lovely day we'd just had and I felt so vividly alive and grateful. We live a finite life, in a broken world, it

seems to me unseemly to not, as the liturgy goes, “give thanks and praise”.

A question that popped into many people’s heads was, of course, “How can I help?”. Within weeks or days, the outpouring of generosity had been channelled into aid convoys to Ukraine, vigils had been organised and within days of the Homes for Ukraine scheme being launched some 120,000 groups and individuals registered a willingness to find accommodation for a Ukrainian family or individual, even their pets.

This holy welcome of strangers, by people from all faiths and none, is in stark contrast to the proposed deportation of asylum seekers from the UK to Rwanda, a plan which the Archbishop of Canterbury, among many, has condemned as “an immoral policy which shames Britain.”

I can’t help but wonder if the desire to make an example of these asylum seekers stems from a sexist expectation on men to be perfectly self-reliant and an unwillingness to recognise that men, too, can be victims. Learning that a strong, young man is a frightened and vulnerable survivor challenges this masculine stereotype.

The Gospel - the story of Christ’s life, suffering and resurrection - undermines all these stereotypes but also turns our worldly understanding of power on its head: In the upside-down dynamics of God’s kingdom, the world as it should be, there is a power to vulnerability. The nature of

God was revealed not as a mighty warrior but as a helpless babe. Shocking. And wonderful.



The man Jesus encounters in the country of the Gerasenes was utterly vulnerable. We don't know the details of why he is as unwell as he is, but in the language of the New Testament he is afflicted by a demon and when asked the name of this demon, the nature of his affliction, he rather eloquently replies "Legion".

A legion could number up to 6000 people. He doesn't even know where to start in explaining what is wrong because there are too many stories, he has too much to tell.

Maybe you recognise that feeling, too. Maybe you too say "We're fine..." or "I'm ok", when in reality you feel like replying "Legion! There's too much going on!".

I know why we do it. We don't want to burden people, we worry that we'll share too much, be too personal or intimate. Sometimes the last thing we want to talk about is our afflictions so we talk about runner beans instead.

And, as a listener, we don't want to pry or make anyone uncomfortable, but I think we've all been guilty sometimes of not asking, when we should have asked and the silence can be very heavy.

So, perhaps those of us who are timid should take our lead from those in our community who are vulnerable and who do share. Few things comfort more than the solidarity of knowing we are not alone, neither in joy nor suffering.

It can be a tremendous act of generosity to admit to brokenness, to fragility and vulnerability, because we never know who needs to hear they are not alone.

A prayer:

God, your son became a refugee and had no place to call his own. Help us look with compassion on those who need our help as well as ourselves.

Help and inspire us to work towards peace, justice and a stable climate in order to prevent anyone needing to flee.

Help us tell our stories and help us listen and be with us whether we are heard or unheard.

May our speaking and our silence always be for the greater glory of you.

Amen