

Sermon delivered by The Revd Susanna Pain

Sunday 11 March 2007 - Lent 3C

Ps63, Is55, Lk 13:31-35

This picture hangs in my massage room. It is a symbol of what I do in massage, adult hands cradling a baby, held safe, and sleeping. It is a symbol for God.

I have thirsted for this. I desire this peace and safety of being in God's arms. Jesus says '*How I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing*'.

This is a heartfelt cry of a parent for her children.

'They have killed the prophets and stoned the messenger', yet Jesus' desire is to love them/us, and we squirm and fight and reject that love.

Here is the paradox of desire - thirst, hunger, longing - and destructive behaviour.

The beginning of this week was a bit of a, as Les A Murray would say, 'black dog' time of tearfulness and depression for me. I guess I was tired, and in my tiredness the old issues and black hole of emptiness reared their heads. I found myself eating junk food - trying to fill the hole and cover it over with trash. I found myself filling my life up to cover the spaces - until I finally stopped - acknowledged the emptiness, had an animated discussion with God and raged and wept in a whirlwind, and invited God into the hole with me. I was helped, I think, by my reading the scriptures and praying through my 'retreat at home', facing the darkness and inviting the absent God in.

So finally on Friday, I awoke, and something had changed, at least for now. there was light in the darkness, light shining in the hole in the centre of my being.

I was astounded; struck with awe. How could this be? I reviewed the day past and looked for God's presence in that day, in all my interactions; in the people I met; in the silence...

'O God, you are my God, I seek you.

My soul longs for you

my flesh faints for you' (Ps 63)

Jesus replies:

‘Susanna, Susanna, (Canberra, Canberra),

you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you!

How often have I desired to gather you, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!’

In the middle of this dialogue.

I’ve read two books in the past few weeks which have had a powerful impact on me. The first is ‘Leaving Church - a memoir of faith’ by Barbara Brown Taylor. She tells the story of her calling to the priesthood, and her journey as a parish priest until she decides to leave the parish where she works to teach in a university. She chronicles her experiences and struggles, and the *opening up of her faith. This passage struck me:*

“If I had to name my disability, I would call it an unwillingness to fall. On the one hand, this is perfectly normal. I do not know anyone who likes to fall. But, on the other hand, this reluctance signals mistrust of the central truth of the Christian gospel: life springs from death, not only at the last but also in the many little deaths along the way. When everything you count on for protection has failed, the Divine Presence does not fail the hands are still there - not promising to rescue, not promising to intervene - promising only to hold you no matter how far you fall. Ironically, those who try hardest not to fall learn this later than those who topple more easily. the ones who find their lives are the losers, while the winners come in last.”

“I thought that being faithful was about becoming someone other than who I was, and it was not until this project failed that I began to wonder if my human wholeness might be more useful to God than my exhausting goodness.”

“Several years ago now, I met a former parishioner in the city where he and his family moved so that he could accept a new job. We had gotten to know one another when we both worked in Christian education. After we had filled each other in on our new lives, I asked him where he was going to church. With no hesitation, he said that he was not going anywhere. His life was full. His work was valuable. He spent his days with people of many faiths and no faith at all, who gave him ample opportunity to practice his own.

Still immersed in church life, I was skeptical. “Say more,” I said.

“After a lot of listening,” he said, “I think I finally heard the gospel. The good news of God in Christ is, ‘You have everything you need to be human.’ there is nothing outside of you that you still need - no approval from the authorities, no attendance at

temple, no key truth hidden in the tenth chapter of some sacred book. In you life right now, God has given you everything that you need to be human.”

Barbara had allowed herself to become vulnerable, a human being, not a position, a person, not a label. Only then could she move on to become whole.

How does this resonate with you?

The second book I read was ‘Gift of the Red Bird - The Story of a Divine Encounter’ by Paula D’Arcy. Paula’s book is also a journey of faith, loss, struggle, growth and freedom. Towards the end of the book, Paula writes of a three day wilderness retreat - or quest she made along in the desert of Texas. during this time she ate no food, and drank only water. She faced herself and her God. She came to understand her connection with the world around. *She writes:*

“The wilderness taught me that wherever we live, by whatever name we were taught to call the Divine, we all have the hunger. But we have grown afraid of the hunger and afraid of the other names by which God is known. We cling never more tenaciously than to the small path and “religious” vision that is our own - and we require the entire universe to see it that same, exact way. Our human arrogance. Finally, God contained. Except that God is found in abandonment, and not in fear.

“When the storm raged during my second night on the quest, all the other creatures immediately became a part of the storm. Save me. True to my human being-ness, I had to first resist what I could not understand or control. I searched for ways to reduce my fear and have the storm conform to my management. Only when I learned to become a part of the storm too, replacing fear with trust, did I find what i was searching for.”

Psalm 63:5-6

‘Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you.

So I will bless you as long as I live

I will lift up my hands and call on your name.’

and God replies (in Is 55:1-9)

‘Ho, everyone who thirsts,

come to the water;

and you that have no money,

come, buy and eat.

Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good and delight yourself in rich food'...

Some Pharisees came to Jesus and said to him 'Get away from here for Herod want to kill you!...'

Jesus replied, 'Go tell that fox for me. Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow and on the third day I finish my work...

I have to go to Jerusalem'.

He is on his way. He is on a path and will not be stopped. He stands firm with love and compassion and grace - walking towards certain death because of this...

"On the western slope of the Mount of Olives, just across the Kidron Valley from Jerusalem, sits a small chapel called 'Dominus Flevit'. According to tradition, it was here that Jesus wept over the city that had refused his ministrations.

"Inside the chapel, the altar is centered before a high arched window that looks out over the city. Iron grillwork divides the view into sections, so that on a sunny day the effect is that of a stained-glass window. The difference is that this subject is alive. It is not some artist's rendering of the holy city but the city itself, with the Dome of the Rock in the bottom left corner and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in the middle. Two-thirds of the view is the cloudless sky above the city which the grillwork turns into a quilt of blue squares. Perhaps this is where the heavenly Jerusalem hovers over the earthly one, until the time comes for the two to meet?"

"Down below, on the front of the altar, is a picture of what never happened in that city. It is a mosaic medallion of a white hen with a golden halo around her head. Her red comb resembles a crown, and her wings are spread wide to shelter the pale yellow chicks that crowd around her feet. There are seven of them, with black dots for eyes and orange dots for beaks. They look happy to be there. The hen looks ready to spit fire if anyone comes near her babies.

"But like I said, it never happened, and the picture does not pretend that it did. The medallion is rimmed with red words in Latin. Translated into English they read, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" the phrase is set outside the circle, in a pool of red underneath the chicks' feet: you were not willing.

“If the city were filled with hardy souls, this would not be a dangerous situation. Unfortunately, it is filled with pale yellow chicks and at least one fox. In the absence of a mother hen, some of the chicks have taken to following the fox around. Others are huddled out in the open where anything with claws can get to them. Across the valley, a white hen with a gold halo around her head is clucking for all she is worth. Most of the chicks cannot hear her, and the ones that do make no response. They no longer recognise her voice. They have forgotten who they are.

“If you have ever loved someone you could not protect, then you understand the depth of Jesus’ lament. All you can do is open your arms. You cannot make anyone walk into them. Meanwhile, this is the most vulnerable posture in the world - wings spread, breast exposed - but if you mean what you say, then this is how you stand.

“Given the number of animals available, it is curious that Jesus chooses a hen. Where is the biblical precedent for that? What about the mighty eagle of Exodus, or Hosea’s stealthy leopard? What about the proud lion of Judah, mowing down his enemies with a roar? Compared to any of those, a mother hen does not inspire much confidence. No wonder some of the chicks decided to go with the fox.

“But a hen is what Jesus chooses, which - if you think about it - is pretty typical of him. He is always turning things upside down, so that children and peasants wind up on top while kings and scholars land on the bottom. He is always wrecking our expectations of how things should turn out by giving prizes to losers and paying the last first. So of course he chooses a chicken, which is about as far from a fox as you can get. That way the options become very clear: you can live by licking your chops or you can die protecting the chicks.

“Jesus won’t be king of the jungle in this or any other story. What he will be is a mother hen, who stands between the chicks and those who mean to do them harm. She has no fangs, no claws, no rippling muscles. All she has is her willingness to shield her babies with her own body. If the fox want them, he will have to kill her first.

“Which he does, as it turns out. He slides up on her one night in the yard while all the babies are asleep. When her cry wakens them, they scatter. She dies the next day where both foxes and chickens can see her - wings spread, breast exposed - without a single chick beneath her feathers. It breaks her heart, but it does not change a thing. If you mean what you say, then this is how you stand.” (Source:Internet: The Rev. Dr James B Lemler is Director of Mission for the Episcopal Church USA, New York, NY and former dean and president of Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, Evaston,)