

Sermon on Wednesday 2 September 2020

by Rev. Alan Stewart

Drawing Circles

Anyone who knows me knows I don't do camping. A few weeks ago, however, as a compromise, I spent four nights in a yurt in the Lake District with my nearest and dearest, and I have to say, actually, I loved it. The thing that sold it to me was definitely the king-size bed with a skylight view of the stars! And on those several nights when it was blowing a gale outside, I was deeply grateful not to be huddling in a rain-drenched tent like those camping alongside us.

Surrounded by breathtaking mountains, and away from phone signals, it was the perfect place to switch off from the noise in my head and listen again to that one true voice that restores the soul.

Between the downpours, we walked and talked; we laughed and played cards. We read books.

The book I chose to bring with me was the Turkish writer Elif Shafak's latest '*10 minutes 38 seconds in This Strange World*'. It's the story of Leila and her five misfit friends in Istanbul, and, intriguingly, it begins at the moment Leila takes her last breath.

According to some neuroscientists, brain activity continues for between 3 and 10 minutes after someone dies, and you'll have heard it said that at the moment of death, your life flashes before you. Each chapter (each of those ten-plus minutes) begins with a smell that recalls a significant memory, a moment in Leila's life... occasionally heartwarming, often heartbreaking.

In one particular memory, as a small girl, Leila and her mother are walking in the market place and Leila notices an old man being tormented by some

young boys. And she watches as the boys draw a circle around the old man in the dirt, and asks her mother what they're doing. Her mother explains that the old man is Ahmadi, a sect of Islam considered by the majority sects to be apostate; despised, untouchable. Convention dictated that the man could not leave the circle until a non-Ahmadi chose to rub it out.

And this, of course, troubled the six-year-old, who asked if she could go and rub out the circle and release the old man. Her mother was shocked; she'd never ever thought to question the right or wrong of it. 'He deserves it,' she said, pulling Leila away.

As the book unfolds, Leila's story and the story of her friends mirror this childhood memory. Each one, for different reasons, are persecuted because they are different. And throughout these 10 minutes 38 seconds of flashbacks, we begin to understand that Leila is the one who comes and rubs out the circle that holds each of her five friends captive.

Each circle took its validity, its permission, from a particular take on religion or social convention, and, as I was reading, I couldn't help but think of this story we heard today (John 8. 1-11). A woman is dragged before Jesus in a test designed to expose him. Religion demanded her death, so would he conform to that or would he condone?

Either way, he would divide the allegiance of the crowd. For the first while, he does nothing, apparently ignoring the situation, distracted by drawing in the sand. That's always intrigued me. What was he drawing? Was he writing something, perhaps? Well, of course, we don't know. Having read the story of Leila, I now like to think that he was drawing a circle and then, just before he speaks those game-changing words that cut to the heart of everything, he rubbed it out.

Jesus, I believe, came to rub out the circles that religion and insecurity and jealousy and fear draw in the dirt around our own lives and the lives of

others. And, like Leila, this flawed, damaged, brutalized and beautiful human, he asks us to do the same.

Any religion, any ideology that demonises or draws circles around others is not, and can never be, the way of the One who came, not to rub things in, but to rub them out.

Take a moment to, perhaps, recall moments in our own lives where others drew circles that wrongly defined us; circles that held us prisoner to shame or guilt. And, if you can, imagine Jesus there in that moment, kneeling to rub out the circle. Or maybe you've drawn a circle around someone you can't forgive. Can you, with His help, begin to rub out that circle, that actually holds you both captive, or at least ask for the desire – to want to forgive?

