

Reflection on Sunday 17 December 2023

by Forbes Mutch, Lay Leader of Worship

(Reference: Isaiah, Chapter 40)

Take care of the eagles

We're nearly there! Christmas is coming and the parcel delivery companies are getting fat. We're in the thick of it: goods are being sold, gifts are being bought, presents are being posted.

I'm afraid that I'm a bit of a Grinch when it comes to applauding the commercial Festive Season. As a Christian, I recognise the importance of the birth of Jesus, of course I do. But when I see Christmas decorations appearing in the shops in September (as I did in New York this year), it brings out the cynic in me.

Having said that, I know that I can't stop it happening and I've already opened my first present. The other day, I unwrapped a gift from my sister.

She gave me a pair of socks.

Now these are special socks. They're called 'Holy Socks'; not because they have holes in them, but because they are embroidered with a short Bible verse and, in this case, the motif of an eagle.

Did you know that birds – or fowls of the air – are mentioned nearly 300 times in the Bible, mostly in the Old Testament, not so much in the New. The Apostle Paul, who wrote nearly a third of the New Testament, only mentions birds twice in his Epistles but, otherwise, throughout the Bible there are references to at least 26 different types of birds, including doves, ravens, sparrows and the aforementioned eagles.

The eagle that appears on my socks is a Bateleur, a type of African Snake Eagle. A Bateleur is a beautiful bird; not huge, a sort of medium-sized bird of prey like a falcon, but it is fearless when it comes to swooping down and tackling small reptiles and poisonous snakes.

As a result, villages in Africa will often adopt one of these birds because it protects the people from poisonous snakes.

The problem is that Bateleurs would like to spend nearly all day in the air, covering vast distances hunting for food so, in order to limit the bird's range of flight, villagers will sometimes clip the eagle's wings... not enough so that they can't fly at all but just enough to prevent them soaring high and far. That keeps the villagers safe but it's not great for the eagle.

It strikes me that there are some people, particularly people of faith, working conscientiously with commitment in professions and occupations that demand emotional investment, who are like African Snake Eagles.

Some of these people are so dedicated to doing good works; in protecting people, in supporting the communities around them, that they are in danger of compromising the complete person that God means them to be.

This is not good.

It happens to ministers, teachers, doctors, health professionals, charity workers, aid workers and the occasional (the very occasional) politician. Sometimes these kinds of people burn out and, as a result, they fail to realise their full potential; they have their wings clipped by their dedication to what they see as God's will, and they stay grounded and fail to soar to the heights.

And it's not just care professionals – it can be people in business, with their heads down, doing long hours for the corporate good. Or it could be those hidden service providers: parents, mothers and fathers at home, looking after their children, or those who care for elderly relatives.

So, what do you do if you are one of those people; someone who is like an African Snake Eagle, someone who spends all their time, maybe in difficult circumstances, protecting the village and, as a result, is unable to soar above the daily grind; someone who loses sight of the big picture of what they are contributing to and is suffering from the resultant stress? Do you think God wants you to burn out? No, he loves you too much for that.

The reference to eagles on my socks is taken from Isaiah, Chapter 40. It says: *They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength.* We heard the start of this passage in our first reading this morning. But carry on with the same passage, and you hear something that all people under stress need to hear. This is Eugene Peterson's version from The Message:

God doesn't come and go. God lasts.

He's Creator of all you can see or imagine.

He doesn't get tired out, doesn't pause to catch his breath.

And he knows everything, inside and out.

He energises those who get tired,

gives fresh strength to dropouts,

for even young people tire and drop out,

the young in their prime stumble and fall.

But those who wait upon God get fresh strength.

They spread their wings and soar like eagles,

They run and don't get tired,

they walk and don't lag behind.

We have entered the season of Advent, we are approaching Christmas, which is not just about Amazon parcels and pairs of socks but is the celebration of the birth of Christ; the Christ who said:

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

So, I'm going to ask you to do something slightly different. I'd like you to take a moment right now to call to mind one person, someone who you know, or suspect, is suffering from the stress of serving others. It might not be a doctor or care professional; it might be someone closer to you, it might even be yourself, someone who is caring for a sick relative or marital partner or older parent or someone who is caring for the family, for the children.

STOP! Stop thinking about the worries that consume your daily thoughts. Stop thinking about today's lunchtime roast, about the kids who are visiting this afternoon, about the deadline you missed on Friday, about the Christmas cards you haven't written or presents you haven't bought. JUST STOP and think of someone who is struggling with much bigger problems. Give thanks for the work that they do and pray for their protection. I'll give you thirty seconds.

Prayer

Loving Father, may those who are grounded, unable to feel the fullness of joy that life offers, know, whether they have a faith, whether they have no faith, that they are created by you. They are yours, yours by choice; they are loved, embraced, saved by your love and grace, welcome in your family and precious in your sight.

Jesus, you came, so that we all might be made complete, made all that we were ever meant to be.

You came as a Shepherd, Lord, seeking every sheep that is lost so that you might bring them home. You can be the Saviour of all who heed your call.

Remember the words of Psalm 34:

The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles. The Lord is close to the broken-hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. A righteous man may have many troubles, but the Lord delivers him from them all.

So, in their going out and coming in, in their rising and sleeping, watch over all those who are not souring as high as they might, keep them from harm.

In summer sun and winter rain, in their joyfulness and sorrow, watch over them, keep them from harm.

In darkness and in lighter days, in their fears and comfort, watch over them, keep them from harm.

Release all eagles that they might realise their full potential.

This day and all days.

Amen

