

Sermon on Sunday 27 September 2026

by Rev. Alan Stewart

Readings: Philippians 1. 1-11 & Matthew 21. 23-27

The Sleeping Baby (Anger and Rivalry)

I'm reading a wonderful novel at the moment, set within a deeply and conservatively religious community of sheep farmers and weavers on the Outer Hebridean Isle of Harris. It's called '*John of John*' by Douglas Stuart, and it's a novel about isolation, repression and secrets. And within it we meet two brothers, Innes and Sorley, who've lived in the same croft all their life, but have not spoken a word to the other for 16 years; so deep is the hurt and the rivalry between them.

In the showdown we've just read about in Matthew's gospel, we find once again Jesus locking horns with *his* rivals; the religious elite. He's just challenged everything they hold dear. Most significantly, he's confronted the power and control they hold over others, by first riding into the city like a Messiah, and then overturning the exploitation of the Temple by driving out the rip-off money-changers. This is a direct hit at the heart of the religious powerbase and, understandably, they don't like it. They want to know by what authority this jumped up 'Messiah' thinks he can do this, in the hope, perhaps, that his response will give them ammunition to convict him of something worthy of execution.

In a brilliant move, Jesus asks a counter question about John the Baptist's baptism. Was it from God or was it his own misplaced fantasy? This, of course, leaves these religious leaders in a quandary. They're damned whatever they say. So, they're forced to walk away until the next opportunity to nail this problem presents itself.

These power dynamics are at the heart of all rivalry. Usually, it's about each side seeking validation or status.

Growing up, my older brother and I fiercely competed for the attention of our parents. Because of complications at his birth, my brother spent several years as a young child in and out of hospital. And, as the younger sibling, I resented the fact that my mum couldn't always be there for me. So, this rage grew within, creating a nightmare child who kicked and cursed and tantrumed his way through those early years.

Anger at perceived favouritism or unfairness, combined with a deep sense of insecurity, lies at the heart of rivalry.

Psychoanalysts talk about the wounded inner child, where emotional hurts, neglect or trauma from our early childhood remain alive within us, and then throughout our lives continue to drive our adult personalities. I've heard it explained in terms of a sleeping baby in the back seat of the car. All is calm until something, often seemingly small, prompts that child to awake and scream blue murder, and causes us to drive into rage or withdrawal, into people-pleasing or perfectionism, into a whole number of numbing behaviours.

A Buddhist teacher once said the most important thing is to go to the bottom of our anger; seek out its root. And there, he said, we will all find the same thing – a broken heart.

We've all had our hearts broken. We're all insecure in some way. And insecurity sometimes looks for a whipping boy or a scapegoat, or surrounds itself with things to make it feel secure. I think, for me, I reached for religion and that relationship with the divine is actually what I think daily saves me from myself. Religion, of course, is a two-edged thing. Richard Rohr says, 'It is the easiest place to hide from God'. Sometimes, we want only what feels safe, but as C S Lewis writes in *'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe'*, God isn't safe, but he is good. God is always calling us forward and that can feel risky.

In our first reading, we find the words to one of the earliest and most extraordinary Christian hymns which speaks of Christ's kenosis. That's the fancy word to describe his emptying of himself of all the privilege of divinity, to humbly become one of us. Although he had everything, he was prepared to give it all away. And that's true security. It's one of the things that's always attracted me to Jesus; how secure he was, how firmly fixed his identity was in God.

In my experience, God is the only one capable of healing the rage of the inner child. When we allow God to tell us who we are and what we're worth, that deep primal need, with time, is met. When we begin to see ourselves as God sees us, we can let go of

protecting and pretending, we discover something of that same security that Christ had. We know ourselves to be equally and uniquely loved.

When Jesus faced his rivals, he knew he didn't have to justify himself. So secure was he in his God's love and acceptance.

When we feel angry, like the Buddhist teacher said, we need to go to the bottom of it. We need to listen to our broken hearts, otherwise they will continue to derail us. We need to speak kindly to that inner child, acknowledge the hurt we carry, and bring it to the grace and mercy and tender love of Christ. And that requires the same vulnerability and humility that Christ embodied.

This, says the apostle Paul, is the only way to be church; to work at and nurture that humility. Humility asks that we take off our shoes when we approach one another, because we share holy ground, and I am sorry for the times when I've disappointed you, or trampled unknowingly, perhaps, on what is holy or sacred to you.

That toddler rage I spoke of earlier hasn't gone. It's just more subtle these days. I'm still quick to feel wounded. The difference is that I'm trying to understand those wounds and the wounds of others. I've taken to asking myself three questions about the person before me:

1 What fear drives you?

2 What pain do you carry?

and

3 What is good and beautiful about you?

These questions are also a good place to start with our own healing. What fear and what pain do I carry? And maybe the harder question - What's good and what's beautiful about me?

So, may we each know a life more free of fear, a life more full of love.

Amen

