



A sermon for the Cathedral Eucharist at Wells Cathedral, preached on Sunday 21 June by the Very Reverend Penny Bridges, Dean of St Paul's Cathedral, San Diego, California

The Third Sunday after Trinity

In the name of the Holy Trinity, one God.

It is an immense privilege to be in this pulpit today. I am deeply grateful to Dean Toby, who invited me to preach when he learned that I would be visiting for the school reunion weekend. By way of introducing myself, let me start by saying that Wells is the second of three significant cathedrals in my life. I was baptized as an infant at St Anne's Cathedral, Belfast. When I was orphaned as a teenager, I attended Wells Cathedral School; and at the end of this month I retire as Dean of St Paul's Episcopal Cathedral, San Diego, California.

When I was at Wells 50 years ago, there were no girl choristers, let alone female priests, but things have changed, and in response to God's surprising call I was ordained 29 years ago today in the Episcopal Church, USA.

In this pulpit, over 300 years ago, stood Bishop Thomas Ken, who suffered for his outspoken insistence on the sacredness of promises and vows, and who preached here in a time when this country was recovering from a civil war, father against son, mother in law against daughter in law. The Gospel was then, and is again today, distressingly accurate in its portrayal of a world where communities and families are torn apart by ideology, especially right now in the US where I have spent my ordained ministry. Reaching back to our reading from Genesis, the story of how Hagar, an enslaved woman of colour, was used and mistreated by those we regard as the patriarch and matriarch of our faith, tolls a sad bell of recognition in the current political climate, and reminds us that dysfunctional families and blended families, with all of their complications, are nothing new.

In this time when we see politicians dehumanizing immigrants and people of colour and misrepresenting history for their own advantage, we need to be reminded that God's eye is on the sparrow: that every single human being is precious in God's eyes. God took care of Hagar and her son when the human beings responsible for their welfare turned against them and forced them into the desert. But that doesn't excuse our contemporary behaviour towards those who find themselves in deserts of poverty or violence.

San Diego sits on the Pacific coast in the extreme southwest of the USA, up against the US-Mexico border: the Mexican city of Tijuana is adjacent to San Diego and together they form a single metropolitan entity; but they are divided, by physical walls and brutal political realities. The Museum of Us in San Diego currently has a compelling exhibit called *Hostile Terrain*. It displays a large wall map of the desert along the US Mexico border going east from San Diego into Arizona. The map has X marks with longitude and latitude coordinates scattered across it.

Visitors are given a paper luggage tag or toe tag, with a set of coordinates written on it, along with some identifying characteristics: male or female, adult or child. The visitor is invited to find the location on the map that matches the toe tag. That location marks the spot where human remains were found: the mortal remnant of one of God's children, male or female, adult or child, who perished in the desert while attempting to cross on foot from Mexico to the US. There are hundreds of these on the map. The exhibit also displays items found with the remains: a child's toothbrush, a pair of boots, a purse and a pair of glasses.

This is the silent witness of the Hagar and Ishmaels of our time, people who have been cast out by the powerful, whose lives have been judged of less value than a sparrow's. We might imagine that many of those people carried the story of Hagar in their hearts, hoping that God might send an angel to rescue them, but in vain. In fact there is an organisation called Border Angels, whose volunteers distribute bottles of water across the desert for migrants to find, if they are lucky. But many are not lucky.

Three times in our Gospel passage, Jesus exhorts his followers not to be afraid. Why does he have to repeat it three times? Because we don't want to hear it. How can we not be afraid, especially when our fidelity to values of love, justice and universal human dignity creates conflict within our communities and families?

If we are willing to let go of our lives as they were and embrace the life that God offers, we can live as if we are not afraid; we can live as if we trust that God's eye is on each of us, as if we really believe that death is not the worst thing that can happen. If we are truly going to follow Jesus, we may well be afraid from time to time, but we can let of the life we thought we had, and courageously put our trust in the God who cares for every sparrow on the rooftop. This is the core of Christian discipleship.

When I left Wells, I had no clue that God would eventually lead me to the United States, to Southern California, to a vocation of ordained service in a cathedral congregation filled with people who had been wounded and rejected by prior religious communities and even by their own families, people who had firsthand experience of the conflict Jesus describes. I have been surprised again and again

by God's call to lay down what I thought would be my life in order to take up the life of a faith leader in one of America's largest cities. And I have found that the life God offers us is life abundant, life that we can generously share.

During his time as Bishop of Wells, Thomas Ken would regularly invite twelve of the poorest men and women in Wells to dine with him at his table. By giving his neediest neighbours the dignity of dining with him, Bishop Ken showed us that, instead of saying there is no more room at the table, we should strive to fashion a bigger table, because everyone deserves a seat at God's table.

When we embrace the conviction that every human being is precious in God's eyes, that each of the people we encounter is known to God and cherished by God, we may find that life is not the life we expected. We may face resistance and conflict even from our nearest and dearest. But we can be confident that God is with us, for in the words of the Collect being prayed today by my colleagues in the Episcopal Church, God never fails to help and govern those whom God has set upon the sure foundation of God's loving-kindness. Thanks be to God.

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