

## **GOD'S DISTURBING SPIRIT**

**Sermon preached at 10.00 am Sung Eucharist  
St. Edmundsbury Cathedral  
Sunday 9 June 2019 - Pentecost**

I've never understood why some people believe it's lucky to be hit by a bird dropping. It strikes me as deeply unlucky. A couple of weeks ago I was stepping out of a shop in town when a bird poo landed on the pavement right in front of me. I'd didn't feel unlucky. I felt relief!

If you go to the seaside, you risk a heavier bombardment. Seagulls deliver significant bombs with uncanny accuracy. I go to Aldeburgh regularly. The only downside I can think of about going to Aldeburgh is the mess the seagulls leave on the car. Great splats.

There are bigger bird bombers than seagulls. My Dad lives in a town with a mere, a lake. The lake attracts lots of water birds – great big ducks, great big geese, great big swans. The side of the mere where the birds congregate is always a horrible mess.

This is why the symbol of the Iona Christian Community is a wild goose. So often the Holy Spirit is represented a dove: a gentle, cooing dove, that slowly descends on to Jesus at his baptism. There's nothing gentle and mild about a wild goose. They make a great honking noise. And they deliver huge great poos.

A wild goose is a disrupter, a disturber of the peace. That's why the Iona Christian community has the wild goose as its symbol. A strong theme in the Iona community is the Holy Spirit being a disrupter, the Holy Spirit as a challenger, unsettling the status quo, bringing change where there is injustice, bringing freedom where there are chains, bringing new life where life has gone stale. The Holy Spirit as a wild goose comes with great honking noises, disturbing our peace. The Holy Spirit as a wild goose comes with great droppings, unsettling our comfortable lives.

Some of us gathered here on Monday for the funeral of Jean Norton. Jean was a wonderful character, a big personality, a woman of strong opinions and she wasn't afraid of sharing them. She was part of the Cathedral community for over 60 years from when her father was the Archdeacon of Sudbury. Jean's great collection of nieces and nephews found a prayer in her bedside table. It's known as the 17th century nun's Prayer, though her family call it Jean's Prayer because it's so like her. Here are some of the lines.

*Lord ... keep me from the fatal habit of thinking I must say something on every subject and on every occasion.*

*Release me from the craving to straighten out everybody's affairs.*

*Within my vast store of wisdom, it seems a pity not to use it all; but you know Lord that I want a few friends at the end.*

*Teach me the glorious lesson that occasionally I may be mistaken.*

*Give me the ability to see good things in unexpected places and the talent in unexpected people.*

Who are the disturbers in your life? Who are the people who upset your patience? The people who restrict your kindness? The people who reveal the limits of your compassion? We all have them, those people who press our buttons. It's a great challenge for us that the people we find difficult are not only God's children too, but they may also be channels of God's grace to us. They may even be the way the Holy Spirit is challenging us, disturbing our righteousness and self-image. Think of someone who presses your buttons. It won't take long, and one is enough! Think of them. Ask God to bless them. Later today, if you can, reflect on what that person teaches you.

Jesus said “This is the Spirit of truth ... the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything”.

Over time, with practice, we learn to notice the Holy Spirit prompting us, nudging us, occasionally giving us a good slap. The disruptions, the disturbances come as much from within as without. Often we try to mask them – we adopt all sorts of avoidance strategies. I like a smooth pond with calm waters most of the time. It’s taken me a long time to learn that God often speaks through difficult experiences and uncomfortable feelings. Big surprise! There’s usually a difference between how I feel about something and how things really are. The Sufi mystic Rumi wrote about these things.

*This being human is a guest house.  
Every morning a new arrival:  
a joy, a depression, a meanness.  
Some momentary awareness comes  
as an unexpected visitor.  
Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they’re a crowd of sorrows,  
who violently sweep your house  
empty of all its furniture.  
Still, treat each guest honourably.  
He may be clearing you out  
for some new delight.  
The dark thought, the shame, the malice,  
meet them at the door laughing,  
and invite them in.  
Be grateful for whoever comes,  
because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond.*

Today we welcome God’s Spirit. More wild goose than gentle dove. More tongues of fire than cooling waters. We welcome the Spirit’s disturbing, challenging presence.

*Canon Matthew Vernon  
Canon Pastor & Sub Dean*