

Mark 6:14-29

We love to reimagine and reinvent ourselves. It's part of the human condition to consider, to have ambition, to plan, to hope. Sometimes our re-imaginings are a luxury - we're prone at New Year to consider what we would like to be different - we might reimagine ourselves slimmer, less materialistic, leading a simpler life with more time for those relationships which are important to us. We reimagine ourselves through trying on new clothes, taking up a new hobby, joining a gym, going to the hairdresser.

Sometimes re-imaginings are a necessity. Like the thousands of migrants setting off from their destroyed or unbearable homes, in search of a better future no matter what the cost, no matter how long or how risky the journey.

And sometimes there is enforced re-imagination. Like the patients and relatives I meet in my daily work in the hospital, who are having to adjust to the experience of illness, to reimagine their lives and reinvent themselves in the light of unexpected constraints in their bodies.

And of course in these past weeks, both the actuality and the memory of terrorist attacks, bringing death, grief, disrupted lives, exploding any sense of security. For those caught up in such a crisis, the task of reimagining is almost unbearable - What now? Where do we go from here? How is life re-imagined now??

These must have been some of the sentiments of the disciples of John the baptist and Jesus at the news of John's horrific and seemingly senseless beheading - fearful cruelty to impress the party guests. And sadly there are echoes of such senseless cruelty in beheadings we hear about in the news, posted as entertainment on the internet. We aren't told how the disciples respond, other than when they heard about it, they came and took John's body away, and laid it in a tomb. We can only imagine their desolation, and the disorientating experience of being in unexpected, unfamiliar, and certainly unwanted territory. Where do we go from here? How do we carry on?

I'm sure we've all had a taste of this kind of uncomfortable disorientation - whether it's through the loss of a loved one, a broken relationship, a serious illness, a redundancy, or even just the natural process of ageing, where things don't work like they used to - unfamiliar territory of aches and pains, strained memory, the sense of being left out or left behind with the pace of change and development of technology.

Lovely Nicky, in our pains, losses and disorientation, we will in some measure be looking to you as a priest and as a leader. No pressure!! Your task is to help us to re-imagine, to help us to reinvent ourselves. Because reimagining is at the very heart of God. The first verses of Genesis tell us about a God who is present to the chaos at the beginning of time. We are told that "the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters" (Genesis 1:2, NRSV). The Hebrew word for this formless void has an almost lyrical ring to it — *tohu vabohu*. Some scholars call the *tohu vabohu* chaos and desolation, and some call it formless and empty nothingness. But whatever we call it, the effect is the same. When

we face trauma or great challenge in life, it is as if our life story has been totally disrupted, it becomes formless, empty of its previous meaning, confused, chaotic - *tohu vabohu*. But what we learn right at the beginning of Scripture is that the Spirit of God is attentively present to the chaos - some bible translations say that the Spirit of God hovers over the chaos, giving a sense of brooding. Like a hen covering its chicks with its wings. And order and life are brought out of the nothingness, out of the chaos, through God's words 'Let there be...'. 'Let there be light'.... 'let the earth put forth vegetation'... 'let there be lights in the dome of the sky'. God calls unimagined goodness and beauty out of chaos.

The spiritual writer Margaret Silf has said, "What was true for the beginnings of our universe might also hold good for the beginnings of every new stage in any one life... chaos is not bad news, a mess that we have to bring back into the right kind of order, the order that existed before... On the contrary, chaos is a sacred reality, the very thing that is needed for a new creation to begin. Chaos is a gift overflowing with potential." (p47).

This is not to belittle the pain of chaos - the experience of it can utterly drain life from us - we can become angry, fearful, hopeless, depressed, isolated from others and from ourselves. But however painful it is, the kernel of potential - the gift that Margaret Silf talked about - is still there. I was struck by an interview on the radio this week with Esther Hyman whose sister Miriam was killed in the 7/7 London bombings...

She was asked by the interviewer 'How the family dealt with it?'

- "it's been a long path, one foot in front of the other,..."... "you know, everybody has what you may call a tragedy, it's an event in somebody's life that's a negative event, nobody's going to have a perfect life, but you know, it doesn't matter so much how you feel about it, it's how you respond to it, and we've chosen to respond in as positive a way as we can, relinquish the need to cling onto any negativity, hatred...anything like that, and we are concentrating on trying to create Miriam's vision of a safer, more inclusive society, where we hope that as few people as possible will have to go through the experiences that we have"

So the task of reimagining begins with recognising the kernel of potential, the glorious truth that reimagining is at the heart of God, and nothing, not even death, is beyond the reach of his brooding Spirit. And we are created in God's image; the desire and the capacity to reimagine is in our hearts too.

Nicky, you'll be pleased to know that this task of reimagining is not only yours, but it's a shared task - we are called to do it as a community, as the body of Christ in the places where we worship, live and work. And we know and are thankful that you are already very gifted in sharing the task. It is your delightful nature to get people talking, thinking and sharing ideas; your sermons are not one way traffic like this one is... And through this sharing of ideas, the saying together of 'Let there be...' there has already come much fruit - 'Let there be shared worship in Hale and Woodgreen'; 'Let there be the Hale's Angels', 'Let there be...a community fair-trade coffee morning'; 'Let there be...a toilet' which, of course is a very useful thing...!!

Nicky, as a priest in God's church, you will have the privilege each week of proclaiming truth, of speaking God's potential into the dark or forgotten corners of our lives and our community. But you

will do it together with those who are present. The liturgy reflects this shared work - all the way through our service sheets there is call and response, call and response, reiterating our shared story, the story of God sustaining, nurturing, bringing life and hope out of chaos.

And the words which for me are at the heart of our worship in the Eucharist are those at the beginning of the Eucharistic prayer - the call from the priest: 'The Lord is here'; the response from the congregation: 'His Spirit is with us'. These words take us back to another beginning, the *tohu vabohu* where God is present to create, to call out the goodness, speaking those words 'Let there be...'

And another great privilege of the priest Nicky, is to speak words of blessing. To bless is to call out the very best in a situation, in a person, in a community. The priest and writer John O'Donahue speaks of blessing like this:

"We never see the script of our lives; nor do we know what is coming towards us, or why our life takes a particular shape or sequence... A blessing opens a different door... the human heart continues to dream of a state of wholeness, that place where everything comes together, where loss will be made good, where blindness will transform into vision, where damage will be made whole, where the clenched question will open in the house of surprise, where the travails of life's journey will enjoy a homecoming. To invoke a blessing is to call some of that wholeness upon a person now."

So Nicky, we look forward to your priestly ministry among us, to sharing with you the task of supporting each another in our reimaginings through the ups and downs of life's unexpected turns. A priestly ministry is not an easy one - it will be challenging to the core. But as we were reminded in our reading from Ephesians, each of us is chosen by God before the foundation of the world, adopted through Christ as his children, lavished with grace, given all wisdom and insight, marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit, the pledge of our inheritance of redemption. We have everything we need for the journey.

So on your journey from here Nicky,

May God hold you forever in the palm of his hand.

May you know strength and deep contentment in your priestly ministry.

May you know always our love, prayer, support and gratitude.

In the name of Christ our Lord.

Amen.