

Sermon

21 June 2015

West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood

By: Rev Dr Jonanda Groenewald

Text: Matthew 10:29-31

Baptism

In our reading today we heard what Jesus told his disciples when he sent them out into the world to go tell people about him and about God's love for them. In the section we didn't read, Jesus told his disciples that it wasn't always going to be easy, but that they didn't need to be afraid, because God would be looking out for them.

He then explains how important they are in the eyes of God, by referring to how much God cares about everything and everybody he made, even sparrows, for example – a sparrow was a wee bird that was worth almost nothing in Biblical times. *Two* sparrows were sold for *one* penny – yet not a single sparrow would fall to the ground without God taking note of it.

People are worth so much more than sparrows, so just imagine how well God would take care of them (and still takes care of us)! Every single hair on their heads is numbered. In other words: God would never leave his disciples alone and not care for them. And the same is true for us.

But this might lead you to wonder: What about the bad things that happen to people then? Well, it's not God's *will* that bad things happen to people, but we live in a broken world. Not everybody respects the commands of God and people hurt each other easily. Even to the extent that wars start.

But no matter what happens to us, God promises to always be there. We can live in hope, because he will always look out for us.

In Bethulie, South-Africa, in 1902, during the 2nd Anglo-Boer War, a woman called Anette Marais sat in the concentration camp and looked around at the faces of all the dirty, tired women around her.

If she looked up she could see the high fences of the camp around them. How long was this going to last? She wondered for the 100th time...

The previous night she prayed and prayed and asked God to show her how she could bring hope to these woman, because who knew how long they would have to stay captive there?

Feeling drained and hopeless, she opened her Bible and read the words of Matthew 10:29 to them: *Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father.*

While she was reading these words, a tiny sparrow came and sat on her shoulder. The rest of the women stared at her in amazement. And just like that, the sparrow became the sign of hope in that concentration camp.

Slowly but surely they regained the will to live, because they realised that God was with them, and that the war wouldn't last forever.

And it didn't. On the 21st of May 1902 the war was over. On her way back to her house, Annette told the sparrow story to an influential lady, who retold the story to General Jan Smuts (the soon to be prime-minister). He decided to print the sparrow on the smallest coin in South Africa, a quarter penny at the time.

The smallest coin when I grew up was the 1c, and these still had sparrows on them.

Roundabout 80 years after this happened, a now famous South African singer and song writer, Jak De Priester, sat in a park in London. He was out of money, feeling homesick and alone. And he read the very same passage in the Bible...

This gave him hope and he started going for job interviews, and tired, but with a possible job in store, he got on the train back home one afternoon. And what did he pick up on the floor of that train, in London? A South African 1c coin with the sparrow on it! He said that that made the world stand still for him for a few minutes. He knew that even though he was feeling so very alone, God was with him. He had hope for the future again.

The sparrow is the sign of hope. In life threatening circumstances, like that of the disciples; in war, like for the women in that concentration camp; in confusing and troubled times, like for the now very famous singer; in whatever circumstances we have to face today – the sparrow

is a wee reminder that God is there, even in the worst and most difficult times.

(Just like baptism,, is a reminder that we and our children belong to God – and that he will always be there for us, no matter what. Every single hair on head is counted.)

We live in a broken world. Things don't always work out the way we planned. Wars break out – in the world, or in our personal lives. We get left behind or pushed away or we get terminally ill. Life's not always easy.

It's never been – not for Jesus' disciples, not for the people who lived 100 years ago, not for famous people who seem to not have a care in the world, not for us.

But no matter what we have to go through, we have the hope that God is with us. Every single one of us is special in God's eyes. And when you need to be reminded of this, He might send a sparrow to come sit on your shoulder, or he might let a friend put their hand on your shoulder. He might show you the solution to your problem, or give you the grace to accept the things you can't change. He might let you pick up a meaningful penny, a token of his care, or he might send you someone who cares, somebody who might not have all the answers, but who at least brought tissues.

You are important to God. Every single hair on your head is counted.

So whether you desperately need to see that sparrow, or whether you maybe need to *be* that sparrow for someone else – remember: God is always there. Never lose hope. No war can go on forever.

And the most important battle of all, the battle against evil and death, has already been won by Jesus.

Faith will give you wings – if what you are going through is too hard to handle, God will make you fly.

So let's be thankful for all the good times and all the good things in our lives, and in those times when the path we have to take is a difficult one, let's never lose hope.

Open your eyes and see the sparrow – on a penny, on your fence, on your shoulder, in someone's eyes.

If you believe in God, He will *never* let go of your hand, no matter what.

Amen