

On Wednesday morning for International Women's Day I was invited to a breakfast hosted by the Associated Country Women of the World. When I mentioned to a few people that I had been invited – the first response I received was well '*take your knitting' and enjoy the jam!* I laughed – because there was a time when I would have believed this! Most women's groups of this type – the Women's Institute or the Country Women's Groups in other countries are often under estimated as it is assumed it is all '*jam and Jerusalem*' (as though it is not valuable) – but actually in every country of the world these organisations have started as, and continue to be, places of social and political change – not just for women but for society.

We often equate this with modern movements and liberalism like that exhibited in the calendar girls – but actually it pre-dates this. The Associated Country Women of the World began in 1927 at a time when many of the world's women still couldn't vote (and many still can't) – and when it was illegal in many countries for women to own property. In Australia for example, the Country Women's Association established baby health clinics in all rural towns, but were often unable to buy land for the clinics to be built on – and so sympathetic men were found to purchase land on their behalf of their organisations.

We may wonder why anyone considers the need for International Women's Day in 2017 and yet despite all this work from many organisations over many years gender equality is not even close. I was reminded on Wednesday that *Women hold only 22% of parliamentary seats worldwide. They spend, on average, 90% of their earned income on their families (in contrast with 30-40% for men) and represent two thirds of illiterate adults globally and only 5% of national heads of state*¹.

The statistics are unsettling, and it wasn't the only event, interaction or meeting I had that seemed to have that effect. We live in unsettling times when our expectations of what is possible in terms of justice, equality and inclusion are not met by the reality of our society or ourselves.

Some of you have asked me during the week about the statements in the media about the Bishop designate of Sheffield – who has now withdrawn from the appointment. When, 21 years ago the church agreed to ordain women, and 2 years since they agreed to allow women to be Bishops - they did so with a series of conditions – one being that there would be room in the church for those who did not agree and did not want oversight of women. Most of the time the church lives in this diversity relatively well – though it means for some of us there are situations that are always uncomfortable. Parishes and Priests were able to indicate the oversight, or type of priest they were prepared to work with. This was the case for the full spectrum. In London, there is a special system for how this is managed.

About a month ago the Crown Nominations Committee announced their chosen candidate for the Bishop of Sheffield – a very capable and experienced priest called

¹ A public statement from the Associated Country Women of the World

Phillip North – while Phillip is a very able person and priest he also does not recognise the ministry of women as priests. Sheffield is an episcopal area where half the priests are women. So the question was asked – can a Bishop be appointed who will not recognise the legitimacy of half his clergy?

Sadly – rather than a rational debate about what should or shouldn't happen – the debate raged mostly in social media with the personal attacks on many involved that were totally inappropriate.

Again – unsettling on many levels – about issues of inclusion and justice – but also about how treat each other when we don't agree.

But the thing that most unsettled me about this debate is that as a women priest I have known since my ordination that there will be parts of the church and jobs I will be excluded from because of my gender – it is not just but it is the reality – but for me this week I realised that this is not the case for everyone in a new way.

So why am I bombarding you with facts about unsettling political events in the past week? For me what stands out in the three readings that we have heard today is about how our life's journey, our call by God into the next stage – the next experience of life – is often unsettling.

Abram and Sarai had a relatively good life within their nomadic community. And in the midst of this good life of routine and seasons God calls them to a new place – to a new land – not just to be migrants who need to learn how to settle within a new community – but also to be a prophet – to be a spokesperson for God.

It is important to note that Abram and Sarai -- whose names will soon be changed to Abraham and Sarah -- are wealthy migrants, "very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold" (Genesis 13:2). Even so, their wealth does not make them invulnerable². And later in this story Abram will tell Sarai to pretend he is his sister to protect them. But in this move, it is not just Abram identity within the community that changes – it is also his inner identity as he comes to terms and is obedient with what God is calling him to do. What God asks of anyone throughout history is not necessarily recognised by the community in which they are called to act – whether that is because they are foreigners, or because of gender, or because the message they bring is hard to hear. Living as one who is called can be "unsettling," as it was for Abram and Sarai. For them it required a physical change, but also a spiritual reorientation³ - the same can be true for each of us at different points in our lives. We will need to not just to adapt to the physical changes around us, but this will also require us to re-orientate our spiritual compass.

² http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3193

³ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3193

Lent is a good time for us to calibrate our spiritual compass – a time to look at those things which unsettle us – physically and spiritually – and consider if we need to make any changes – and what they might be.

Sometimes however our unsettledness is needed to call us into action. And this was the case in our Gospel story today – where we have Nicodemus in conversation with Jesus.

Nicodemus is describe as one who believed in Jesus because he has seen the signs, and yet in the interactions Jesus seems sceptical. It is one thing to believe that someone is blessed, or gifted or even potentially the Messiah. It is another thing to allow that to unsettle you in such a way that you will give up your power and position – or sense of being right! Nicodemus comes to Jesus, acknowledging he is a Rabbi, but he comes to him secretly, under the cover of darkness ‘night’ – so that it is secret. Scholars also suggest that the writer is trying to indicate Nicodemus lack of understanding in the use of these images too. But Jesus sees straight away that Nicodemus does not understand the purpose of Jesus ministry – that he needs to be prepared to be unsettled – in all senses of the word – to grow in his relationship with God. And so the dialogue about begin ‘born again’ follows. Jesus is trying to help Nicodemus to understand that seeing the signs is not enough. The kingdom of God cannot be detected with the physical eyes. It is rather a reality that can only be perceived through the eyes of the Spirit, after the person has been⁴ born anew – or transformed by God.

Our passage today ends with one of the most well-known and yet unsettling two verses in the whole bible “*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him"* ⁵

Jesus and God’s presence in the world is unsettling – but it occurs to bring about transformation not condemnation. Whatever unsettles us at present, whether it is world or political events, whether it is our personal circumstance, or the circumstance of those we love, or whether it is our faith and what we think we are being called to do - the promise of God is the same as the promise given to Abram – I am with you. I love you. I will walk with you as your physical and spiritual life is reshaped and reformed. I have walked ahead of you and beside you.

Often when I am unsettled I turn to the words of the psalmist as a source of prayer. And the psalm set for today which we have not read is Psalm 121. I think it sums up very well God’s promise to Abram, Nicodemus, the Romans and even us in all that we will face, together and apart, in the coming week.

⁴ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3188

⁵ John 3: 16-17

I lift up my eyes to the hills – from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.⁶

⁶ Psalm 121