

A sermon given at Holy Cross, Crediton on 21 April 2013 on the fifth Sunday of Easter by Prebendary Nigel Guthrie

John 10 – No one can snatch them out of my hand

I've held many babies in my professional capacity, and I haven't yet dropped one in the font, although there have been a few near misses with larger wriggly ones. It is always a privilege to hold a child, but holding my own children shortly after their births were some of the most moving moments of my life. You might have been privileged to hold a baby. Even if you haven't had children of your own you might have held the baby of a family member or friend. But if you've never held a baby then perhaps you would bear with me and imagine someone holding one.

When we hold a young baby, they are not really aware of what is going on and yet they are comforted by being held. Yet a baby is entirely at the mercy of the person holding them. I still feel slightly nervous if I'm invited to hold a very young baby. They seem so small and fragile. But we know that although they are extremely vulnerable they also have a strong life force and will make their presence felt if they are hungry or uncomfortable. If we look at a baby being held we can see what is happening, but the baby itself can't see, it can only feel safe or, perhaps in some circumstances unsafe.

Jesus said 'My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.'

'No one will snatch them out of my hand.' Jesus is talking about his disciples and followers. He is talking about those who followed him in his earthly life and, I believe, he is talking about us. Jesus holds us, as the Father holds him, and as we might hold a baby or small child. And yet when we are held by God we can't really understand what is happening any more than the baby can understand why they feel secure when they are held by a parent.

Of course when children grow up they want to understand things and by the time they understand a lot about the world they are too big to pick up and hold. In fact I can now be picked up quite easily by my elder son and I would certainly do myself an injury if I tried to pick him up. In Saint Matthew's gospel we read Jesus' words  
'I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.'

So we may not fully understand, but we do have a choice. This where we are unlike the baby being held. And in St John's gospel Jesus clearly distinguishes between

those who have chosen his way and those who have rejected it. We have the choice to put ourselves in his hands.

It's good that we should use all our powers to try and understand God. But it's a mistake to put understanding in the place of faith. It's as fruitless as waiting to understand someone we love before marrying them. We can love someone without fully understanding them and we can love God, and know his love, without fully understanding him. Indeed St Paul says that in this world we can only ever see through a glass darkly, or see in a mirror dimly as the modern translation puts it. Until one day we will see him face to face.

This morning's passage from St John's Gospel is part of the section which begins with Jesus' words 'I am the good shepherd'. The language suggests that the disciples, or followers, are like the sheep in that the Good Shepherd cares for them and will lay his life down for them. But if we are followers of Jesus then we are also called to be like him, to be shepherds ourselves. And as such God may well put others into our hands, others in our family, in our community, in our church; others who we might be able to support through a time of difficulty, illness or change. Part of belonging to a church is the knowledge that there are others to pray for us when we find prayer hard. Sometimes the hardest circumstances of life mean that we can't experience God holding us when we feel we need it to know it most. Then others can support us and hold us until we are in a place when we can feel again the presence and protection of God.

And this holding is something which is not only for this world. 'I give them eternal life and they will never perish' says Jesus. We are held now, we are held forever. God will no more drop us than a loving parent will drop their child. A loving parent will do everything they can to protect and nurture their children. And the love of God is immensely greater than that of any human parent. It is the love in which the whole of creation finds its origin. So I believe we can be supremely confident when Jesus says 'No one can snatch them out of my hand.'