

**Sermon preached by the Rev'd Canon Jane Hedges,  
Canon Steward of Westminster Abbey**

**At Choral Evensong for the launch of the St John's Restoration Appeal on  
Tuesday 27<sup>th</sup> February 2007, 7.30pm.**

Readings: Genesis 45:1-15 & Philippians 2

It's not really bedtime but I begin this evening with a bedtime story, so I hope that you are all sitting comfortably, but you are not to go to sleep!

Deep in the jungle there lived a mighty lion. He was powerful and strong with a long, golden mane and huge claws as sharp as razors. When he roared the earth shook and the monkeys ran chattering to the treetops. All the animals were afraid of him and called him King of the Beasts.

The little mouse was especially frightened of the lion. She knew that if one of his paws landed on top of her she would be squashed flat. When she felt the ground tremble under his heavy tread, she would quickly scuttle to safety until he had passed by.

One day the lion lay down with a heavy sigh and, resting his big head on his front paws he fell into a deep sleep. The mouse was busy about her business searching for food, climbing up and down steep termite hills. Up she scurried and the yellow ground felt warm and smooth under her scampering paws. Then she heard a deep rumble and the earth beneath her moved! She lifted her head and looked around. With a shock she realised she had climbed onto the lion's back! What a calamity! But he was fast asleep and snoring loudly so slowly the little mouse tiptoed down towards safety. She was near the ground when the lion woke up. He could feel something tickling him and in a flash his massive paw caught the mouse in a tight grip.

The little mouse almost fainted with fright, but summoning all her courage she squeaked loudly, "O please have pity on me, mighty lion, spare my life and who knows maybe one day I will save yours."

The lion threw back his head and roared with laughter. "You save MY life? A little mouse save the King of all the beasts! But you have made me laugh little mouse, so stop trembling for I will not harm you". Gently he put the mouse down and she ran for cover.

Some time later some game hunters came to the jungle and laid traps for the wild creatures. One day as the great lion prowled along the jungle track he heard a sudden snap and found himself covered in a net. It was wrapped around him so tightly that he couldn't move. The more he struggled the tighter the ropes gripped. He was trapped! The poor lion groaned in despair, but it just so happened that the little mouse was nearby and hearing his cry she ran to his side.

She sunk her sharp little teeth into the tough rope and nibbled away and soon she had gnawed a large hole in the net and the Lion was free. "Thank you, mouse" said the lion. "Now I can see that little friends can become great friends".

I'm sure that you will have recognised that story as one of Aesop's Fables. All of his stories have a moral at the end and the moral given for this tale is: "One good turn deserves another".

But I think this story has a rather more profound moral than that ~ it demonstrates interdependence and teaches us that we all need each other.

However powerful one person or one group may be, there will always come a point at which they are vulnerable and need the care and service of others. As individuals and as groups we all have things to GIVE and we all need to receive.

This evening as we gather here at St John's to celebrate the life of the community here in Fulham, I invite you to reflect for a few minutes on how this church and the local community around it can work together ~ giving and receiving from each other in order to bring out the very best in all the people who worship and live here.

It might be helpful to begin by thinking about some common attitudes within the church towards the world around it, and also of people in the wider community towards the church.

In another well known story, that of Noah's Ark, we hear that the world had become so wicked that God decided to wipe out its inhabitants. Only Noah, an upright man, together with his family and representative group of animals were to be saved. As the flood came upon the earth we can picture Noah and his charges safely gathered into the ark, protected from the wickedness of the world and the destruction about to come upon it.

Down through the centuries Christians have often seen the church as an ark; a place of safety where the good are gathered together away from the wickedness of the world, although sometimes tossed around by the raging waters outside.

The language of “being saved” often associated with this model of the church ~ saved from evil and condemnation and from future punishment.

However, when we turn to the passage we heard in our N.T. lesson this evening and reflect on the life of Christ himself, a rather different model of the church is encouraged. Rather than being concerned for their own well-being, the early Christians at Philippi were encouraged by St Paul to serve the needs of others and to look outwards to the world.

He talks of having compassion and sympathy for others, doing nothing out of selfishness, instead always looking to the interests of the people around them. Because, says Paul, this is how Christ lived.

As God’s Son he had every right to lord it over others, but he didn’t. Instead, in Paul’s word, “Though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant ... And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death even death on a cross”.

Jesus, because he was totally loving, was prepared to be vulnerable in this way and to take risks. It was this love which led to his death ~ he was prepared to sacrifice his own life out of his love for the world.

So Christ’s life gives to his followers a model of service and sacrifice, it is this kind of service and sacrifice which wins the hearts of others and shines out as a light in the world.

This is the kind of life we are called to as individual Christians and as a church.

Unfortunately the church down through the centuries has often failed to live up to this calling and instead of being seen as a loving servant of the world, has appeared remote, hypocritical and judgemental. Rather than being a light which draws others to the love of Christ, it has been just the opposite, putting people off by making it hard for them to belong.

Just over a year ago, I moved to Westminster Abbey from a parish in the Exeter Diocese. There, our Bishop used to keep saying to his clergy, “I want us to become a church with a “Yes” face.

He explained that what he meant by this was making sure that when people in the community approached us to ask for something we didn’t immediately think of lots of reasons to say “No”, Instead, we welcomed their approach and did our very best to accommodate them.

We found that in our town of Honiton this attitude transformed the life of our church. So for example, when we were approached by a group of local farmers to ask if they could transfer their monthly market from an inaccessible, remote sight in the town, to the church forecourt, which was in the centre of the High Street we said “Yes”.

The P.C.C. did debate it thoroughly, considering the objections about commercial activities taking place on Church property, but decided that the Christ-like approach was to help people who had to struggle to make an honest living.

Saying “Yes” had several positive outcomes: It saved the market from closing down; it helped people in the local community because they didn’t have to travel so far to reach the market; but it also helped the church because it brought people into our building to use our facilities and to attend the coffee morning taking place.

That’s just one small example of Church and community working together. Other things which happened in Honiton Parish Church were school concerts, plays and services, art exhibitions, music festivals and various charity events. All of this enabled the church to be open and used throughout the week and built up wonderful relationships between the church and people of all ages in the community.

London is very different from Honiton, but the same principles apply. We can choose to be a church which becomes a safe enclave ~ a place to get away from the problems of the world. Or we can be a servant church engaging with the issues facing the wider community around us.

Likewise, those of you who are leaders in the local community can choose to do things under your own steam or you can choose to co-operate with other agencies in the community, including the church.

So tonight let us remember the moral of Aesop’s fable, and whether we feel like a lion or a mouse or a creature somewhere in between, remember that every single one of us has an important part to play and that working together, co-operating with each other, we will be so much more effective than if we try to go it alone.