

51 Finding the way home

Some weeks ago I took a funeral. It was a bleak scene up in the cemetery, with the mourners standing round the open grave, well-wrapped against the cold. On all sides of us were the hundreds, the thousands, of other graves, with their touching epitaphs and pathetic tokens of love - photos, teddies, statues, models of motor bikes and plastic flowers.

The man whose wife had died had asked that six white doves be released after his wife's coffin was lowered into the grave. The handler gently drew the birds one by one from their basket, giving each one to family members, and one to me.

I had never held a live bird in my hands before. I looked down on this this small bird, a thing of exquisite beauty, sitting in my unsure grasp. She was calm, docile, trusting, and totally vulnerable. She had no idea who I was, or where she was.

What a lesson for us in terms of our discipleship! - that total, quiet dependence as we rest in the arms of the Lord. How hard we can find that simple act of acceptance and submission.

The time came for the doves to be released up into the grey sky. I held my hands up high - a gesture of offering in itself - and with a wish for God's blessing on this His little creature, and a tear in my eye, loosed my grip on those warm, white feathers. She was gone.

She soared away, up and up, revelling in the freedom of her flight. When she was up in the wind, way up beyond the trees, she circled and searched, and sensed, and then somehow knew. She settled on her course towards the south, towards her home that was thirty miles away, and soon she was lost to sight.

What marvel and mystery about this tiny creature of God's creation; what a creature, and what a Creator! Truly, we are fearfully and wonderfully made - not just us, but all of the Lord's creatures (Psalm 139.14).

Doves were used as sacrificial offerings in the Temple in Bible times, as in Luke 2.24. They were plentiful, and cheap enough for poorer families to afford. They were hardly valued at all in human sight - but in God's sight, each one was known and valued and accepted, a creature of such beauty, and such ability. Just as no sparrow falls to the ground without our heavenly Father knowing, surely the same is true for His doves also! (Matthew 10.29).

And so the lives of these little birds were given, their blood was shed, as a vivid picture for the worshippers of our need for repentance, and for the merciful forgiveness of Almighty God.

Since Golgotha and the empty tomb, praise God, no more sacrifices are needed, for the Lord Himself has shed His own blood, once, for us all (Hebrews Chapter 10).

So in those times when life is tough, difficult, unpleasant, scary, we might remember those little white doves, waiting, resting and trusting, and then soaring, and searching - and finding their way home.

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