

It is the experience no parent would ever want to face. The time when the nightmare that only happens to the careless, the thoughtless, the neglectful- in short, to other people- happens to you. The moment when the monsters of your worst fantasies, the barely credible horrors at the far borders of your imagination take flesh, come to life and hammer on your door. For Catherine and Randolph Hearst that moment came on the 4th of February 1974 when the policeman brought them the news that their nineteen-year old daughter Patty had been kidnapped. The Hearsts were not your run of the mill, blue collar couple- he was a billionaire media magnate- but at that moment there was nothing their material fortune could do to protect the couple from their anguish. Hours later a ransom note appeared from the kidnapers who called themselves the Symbionese Liberation Army, a bonkers lefty group which could have walked straight out of a Woody Allen movie, except they were a joke with guns: they had already killed the academic Marcus Foster. In an almost inspired twist on the Robin Hood legend, the SLA demanded that the Hearsts spend six million dollars of their fortune to feed the poor of California for one month: otherwise, in a depressingly familiar twist on the mindless thug routine, Patty was for the chop. The Hearst fortune swung into action, millions of dollars were spent giving food away to the poor and then an already bizarre tale turned surreal, as 59 days after her kidnap Patty Hearst announced to a stunned world that she was joining the SLA. Against all logic and sense, Patty had decided to side with the very people who had kidnapped and threatened to murder her. This was not a ruse in order to gain her freedom, it was one of the most notorious examples of what psychologists know as 'Stockholm Syndrome', the phenomenon in which hostages come to have positive feelings towards their captors. It happens in roughly a quarter of kidnaps and much more frequently in less extreme but analogous situations where one person intermittently harasses, beats, threatens, abuses, or intimidates another- the battered but loyal spouse, the victim who craves the attention of the bully. Although it flies against everything we would like to believe about ourselves, we can all come to love our captors.

Pop that idea somewhere within easy reach because we will return to it shortly, but first we're going to take a short trip into the realm of tub-thumping patriotism as we consider of Great Inventions of Britain, and as I promised a short trip, Great Inventions from Barry in Wales. The place not the guy.

Yes, as well as Gavin and Stacey, Barry can also claim to be the proud birth place of the Mosquito alarm. This charming example of British ingenuity is an alarm that emits a sound at a frequency which is inaudible to over-25s but is intensely irritating to

anyone under that age. It's a bit like the effects of the top 40 or Jeremy Corbyn on older people, but in reverse. Similar idea to those squirrel scarers you see advertised in the Sunday supplements, except the Mosquito actually seems to work. It's use is controversial but it's sometimes used to discourage younger people congregating in certain places like shopping centres. I'm guessing also that there's one installed in all churches. It's almost certain that the Daily Mail would like a Mosquito alarm on every street corner, not as a deterrent, but as a punishment for those people for being young and not hankering for the return of national service.

The mosquito alarm is something of a sledgehammer to crack a nut and a less hi-tech approach would work just as well. Say, a simple boom-box playing a recording one of my sermons, or a loop saying 'we're looking for volunteers...'

There we go. Now you know that there are sounds only the young can hear. It shouldn't be a surprise because it's a commonplace that human hearing is variable and selective, and more particularly there is much that only the ears of faith can hear. Some sounds are everywhere, bathing us, loud in our ears, a cacophony crying for our attention and yet it is only when we are tuned to the faith frequency that we begin to hear them: the tinkling chinking of lost coins; the plaintive, heartbreaking bleat of lost sheep; and swamping every other sound, the grating, rattling, clanking of chains.

The Bible's writers are selective sifters: they don't record everything that was said and done, they choose what they write with care and report the events and sayings that are richest with meaning and relevance. So there is always more going on in a Bible story than what is on the surface, it is always deeply layered with meaning and never is this more the case than where miracles are involved. Now like a Victorian Sunday School teacher you can understand the Bible accounts of miracles as a sort of divine showing off 'look I can do this, I can do that', but they never are. Extraordinary Heavenly power is not wielded just for the sake of it, it is used to make a bigger point, to the greater glory of God. When Jesus heals, we are not asked to marvel at the straightforward physical change effected, wonderful though that may be: we are shown instead faith: growing, grasping, arriving. We are asked to understand the miracles in a wider and bigger context, and we are challenged to look at ourselves and our own relationship with God. Would we sink like Peter if we tried to walk on the water? Would we touch the fringe of Jesus' cloak? Did we

notice the completion of creation as the man born blind becomes not just physically whole, but spiritually awake? Miracles are never just 'showing off'.

So when we hear in the Acts of the Apostles that St Peter is miraculously released from prison thanks to angelic intervention we should realise that we're not being invited to be impressed that some seraph has sprung the saint from the slammer. We must understand this tale as symbolic of St Peter's walk with God, and by extension part of our journey in faith.

How many of us ever notice our chains? How many of us even realise that we are prisoners, slaves; shackled, fastened, secure? Do we never hear those chains rattle? Do we never feel their weight keeping us earthbound, dragging us down? Or like Patty Hearst, have we come to love our chains?

The Christian cliché is that we are captive to our sin, and though that might sound rather over-dramatic for this time of a Sunday morning, it is difficult to deny the truth of the dictum if we assume the broadest definition of 'sin': that which comes between us and God. We can be selective in our definitions, and there's always a religious expert on hand to tell us that this, this and this are the real culprits, but truth is, what those sins are, what keeps us away from God can be almost anything.

Take this example. St Peter had a wife. We know this because St Matthew's gospel tells us that Jesus cured St Peter's mother in law of a fever. As there is no smoke without fire, so there is no mother in law without a spouse, which in those days meant for Peter a wife. We know then that, at least the first pope was married, to Febronia in case you ever wondered what the woman's name was. Marriage was not something that came between Peter and Jesus; perhaps, as Peter's understanding grew through the healing of his mother in law, quite the opposite. In any case, his marital status was not something that ever came between the fisherman and the Lord: Jesus knew precisely what he was doing when he entrusted Peter with the keys of heaven.

St Paul on the other hand didn't have a wife. He never married, which given the misery some of his letters have bequeathed to subsequent generations of women, is something that could be counted a lucky escape for the womanhood of Palestine. Not only was Paul unmarried, he was decidedly frosty about the whole institution: to him marriage was something that keeps us away from God. Better for a Christian not to be married, he said when writing to the Corinthian church: if you are you're

worrying more about pleasing your spouse than pleasing God. Only if you really can't control yourself, he says, should you get married: that way your passions won't lead you into real trouble. It's hardly a ringing endorsement of the nuptial state. For St Paul- personally and in his advice to others- marriage was chains, preventing us from reaching out our arms to God. For St Peter it was nothing of the kind. My hope here is not to enter any debate about marriage; rather to point out that the two founders fathers of the Church had very different chains.

And it is important for each of us to recognise what is binding us, for us to be honest with ourselves as to what comes between us and God, to be able to hear clearly the clink-clank of our own chains. This is doubly difficult, because so often we are languishing in a spiritual Stockholm syndrome: we have come to love our chains. We need to put in some work in order to work out for ourselves what it is that is swallowing up our attention, obsessing and besetting us; and taking us away from Jesus. For each one of us, it will be different. Quite likely it may well not be one of the big set piece sins the churches love to point at that binds us, it may well be precisely what we most believe sets us free that most holds us chained.

The rest of Patty Hearst's story is scarcely less freakish. After just over a year with the SLA as a self-described 'urban guerilla' she was arrested by the FBI, tried and sentenced to seven years in prison for bank robbery. The sentence was later commuted and having served 22 months she was released from gaol. She married her former bodyguard and lived a life out of the limelight.

Perhaps Patty Hearst is a strange subject for a sermon, but her life has one more insight to give us in its co-opted rôle as metaphor for the Christian journey. In 2001, she was granted a full pardon.

Brothers and sisters, still bound and chained, shackled to our sin: we have been pardoned. But only when we stop loving our chains will our hearts be truly free to love God.