

We all know that families can be difficult and there's a temptation to spend the time alone though being alone can be difficult too. There's a tension in us between the difficulty of negotiating relationships and needing time to recover from them, to being ourselves- alone even as a couple or a community. A young woman, Sophie Pavelle, writes of this tension in yesterday's paper

*"I never wanted a wedding of any extravagance, and shied away from the attention it meant. But as months rolled on, the world got hotter, people got sicker, and life felt finite and immediate, I soon realised that to deny the people I loved most in the world the distraction not just of unity – but the very possibility of it – was to deny joy and to reject hope"* (Guardian 30/12/23)

So she has the most wonderful wedding on her husband-to-be's farm in Devon watching the guests enjoying each others company, mending relationships, recovering memories and above all joining in the dance. All this with the additional excitement of storm Antoni – the uninvited gust or guest. And she goes on to say

*"We've created a world that asks us to conform our humanity by "selecting all squares with traffic lights"." But watching people spin in the spirit of stories and new beginnings was confirmation enough. As social mammals we are hard-wired to thrive, adapt and survive – as a community. We do our species and so many others a dangerous disservice when we dishonour our innate tendency to assemble."*

Joseph and Mary bring their child to the temple to acknowledge their belonging to a larger story than themselves and to risk both approval and approbation in doing so – that two edged sword that accompanies all relationship, which accompanies love, which makes life, which sows discord as well as joy

*"you see this child: he is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, destined to be a sign which is rejected – and a sword will pierce your own heart too – so that the secret thoughts of many may be laid bare."*

I've puzzled over that line but now understand it as the way in which truth is revealed to us in our coming together – how we are with one another is how we truly are, and so how we are with God. We need solitariness too to equip ourselves for this battle, each to his or her own degree, but the battle is fought in company – we can gain strength as well as weakness from one another. Sophie Pavelle writes in the context of the terrifying climate crisis which is already upon us but we can see it too in the light of the crisis which has always afflicted us as human beings – to love or not to be. Or as Sophie concludes

*"I snuck into the farmhouse to observe what was happening from an upstairs window. By evening storm Antoni had retreated, and the sun prised apart the charcoal skies and cascaded through the orchard. I heard the first few notes of the fiddle. The ceilidh was beginning. Joy and the joining of hands is activism after all. Care to dance?"*

Care to worship? Care to be together – whatever?

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