

**Sermon preached at the Church of the Holy Trinity, Philadelphia
on Sunday July 13th 2008 by the Reverend Alan Neale
“What are we making today?”**

Though armrests are placed on the benches and though wandering minstrels have been discouraged by city constabulary, Rittenhouse Square insists on remaining a venue for new, and sometimes exotic, experiences!

Imagine this scene... the British Episcopal priest walks across the Square yesterday to officiate at a wedding. He sees a group of attractive and vibrant young people, many of them carrying signs which declare “Free Hugs”. What does he do? Well, with steadfast tread, and happy heart, he approaches the group and receives the two most wonderful hugs and then truly goes on his way rejoicing! And hoping they would still be there after the wedding unlike the wise men... he did not return home another way!

By the free expression of his love and joy and compassion Juan Mann (is that really his name or does it suggest “one man”?) in 2006 began this... what shall we call it? This... ministry?! In two years the “ministry” has moved across the world (yes, I checked, even in Britain) and across all generations... it has brought joy to others and has, I am sure, enabled them, inspired them, equipped them to participate.

At heart, I believe, we all want to be people that are creative, generative, productive... not necessarily on the grand scale of public note, but that somehow, in some way, today you, I, will create something new and something good.

And, if this true, it is when barrenness afflicts the soul, the body, the mind that we most profoundly suffer.

It is therefore heartrending when the patriarch Isaac and matriarch Rebekah confront the pain of their childlessness.

It is therefore catastrophic when St. Paul finds himself drawn to a life of death and dying (the life of the flesh) rather than to inhabit the world of life and creativity (the life of the spirit).

It is therefore tragic when the sower observes that three parts of his precious seed are wasted and produce nothing.

Friends, we are born to create, to make, to in some way be productive... and in this we share in ministry with our God. This is the God by whose very word the world is created and we are daily sustained. It may well be that often, if not generally, what we create is more of the thirty than the hundredfold variety... but we should not let that matter a whit!

Friends, though we are born to create yet often we suffer frustration. I think of the world weary, sadly jaded and soul-sick preacher who laments time and time again, “All is vanity, all is vanity... (from the Message translation, Ecclesiastes chapter one)... There's nothing to anything—it's all smoke. What's there to show for a lifetime of work, a lifetime of working your fingers to the bone? One generation goes its way, the next one arrives, but nothing changes—it's business as usual for old planet earth... There's nothing new on this earth. Year after year it's the same old thing. Does someone call out, "Hey, this is new"? Don't get excited—it's the same old story”. Oh dear, I fear that preacher probably was not big hit with parish search committees... and yet he speaks to the frustration we often feel. I suggest that a significant factor in weariness, fatigue (perhaps even some forms of depression) is that we feel, we reckon ourselves to be frustrated in any and all attempts to make something, to produce, to be generative.

But friend, though we often suffer frustration (deep and profound angst)... God's word to us today is that we must not, we need not, we should not surrender. Rebekah and Isaac, Paul and the sower all present to us examples... they struggled, even at times what they produced out of their barrenness was not total joy (it rarely is!) but they refused to accept the lie... you are useless!

Over recent years some of the most wretchedly painful, tragic words I have heard have come from the mouths of those trying, trying, trying to have children... with no success. There are sometimes the faint suggestions of reasons, of explanations for this anguish... but this hardly eases the pain. Now, over recent years I have also had the joy of sharing in the joy of new birth for those who thought this was truly an inevitable, inexorable impossibility... but this joy, this celebration, hardly removes a heartbeat of pain for those still without children.

The pain of such is understandable... these people want to be able to share with their God, their Maker, their Creator in the primal, mythic, divine work of creation.

The frustration of such is understandable... they do all that they can and far, far more... and still the goal, surely reasonable, seems beyond their grasp and their pleasure.

But it is our task as a Christian community and I dare to call upon God to say that it is the task of the Holy Spirit to enable such never to surrender. And to trust God that in some way He will share with them the joy of creation – though it may not be as they planned or desired, it will be to their pleasure and the pleasure of others.

Let me finish how I began... with reference to “free hugs” (no, don't worry I'm not about to have you all move into the Square with signs reading “free Episcopal hugs” – I'm not sure the world is quite ready for that yet). Yesterday I watched the reaction of passersby... the vast majority, and this cannot be a surprise for you, the vast majority ignored the invitation and walked on by... but this discouraged our friends not at all. And then it struck me... for always, for ever God has offered to us free hugs (free to us, though surely not free to him) and we have rejected, ignored, ridiculed, belittled His offer... He has surely been frustrated but He has never surrendered and will never surrender.

Perhaps the beginning (the daily beginning) of all our possibilities to create, to produce, to be generative begins with this simple capitulation... we allow God to hug us and then know that we are firmly, lovingly held in his everlasting arms! AMEN