

Ready to rumble ... rising strong...



Many of you will know that I am *very* fond of butterflies.

The butterfly is one of the ancient Christian symbols of resurrection. Hope, glory, and freedom grit, determination and immense strength. Butterflies aren't just a pretty face, you know. They are feisty, stubborn little creatures!

Professor Brene Brown wrote a book called *Rising Strong...* where she talks about the path to redemption as reckoning and rumble.

Yes, I know you're all thinking of John Travolta now, getting ready to rumble, putting on the battle armour of prayer and loving action.

Reckoning, says Brene, is like realising – it's when we face a challenge – acknowledging the pain of something. When we are truthful about what hurts in our hearts, or in the world around us, and we work for change.

Scientists once watched the butterfly struggle to leave its chrysalis and tried to help, slitting the cocoon carefully open

... big mistake..

....the butterfly releases a chemical as it struggles to leave the chrysalis which would have strengthened its wings for expansion and flight, and without that it was too weak to survive. Breaking its own way from the cocoon, it was battle-fit, and could face down anything.

The butterfly tells us never give up.... Love and life will win. But also that, sometimes, this comes through wrestling a little. By looking in the face the things that confine us, and breaking them down, reflecting as we grow.

The chrysalis kept the soft caterpillar safe for a time, but it would have killed the butterfly – sometimes, together, whole new chapters of adventure become possible as we grow.

Like the butterfly, the widow in our gospel today could be seen as tiny and insubstantial. Widows, in the scriptures, are on the list of people who need most protection, with few rights, and no status. She represents all people who are treated with injustice by the world, who have no real platform from which to seek change. Who knock at doors and receive no answer, who call out for justice and are not heard.

Our widow today teaches us how to pray and never to give up. To keep knocking on the doors of injustice and oppression and to not take no for an answer, *to call out a reckoning*, knowing that God will walk right alongside us in his strength.

This widow is ready to rumble, no matter how long it takes.

She is full of God... full of determination, of the desire for life and hope.

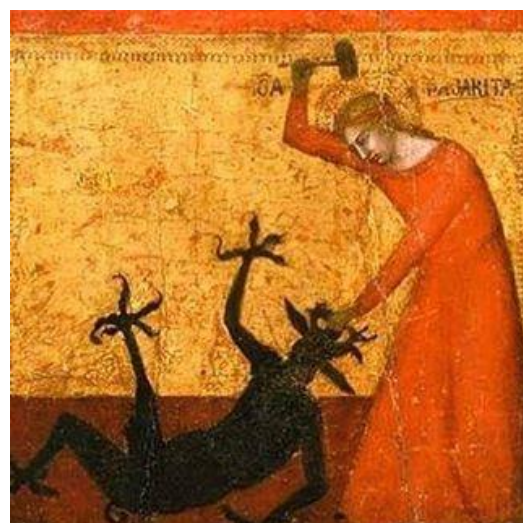
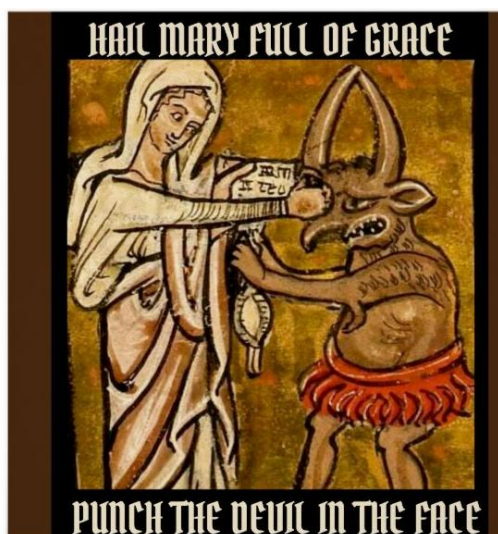
We can see the twinkle in Jesus' eye ... what, he says, did you think the God figure in my story was the Important Judge? Nah... it's *this widow*.

Jesus takes his place alongside all those who are overlooked and unheard. It is his voice and life we see in her persistence and strength.

Today ends the week of awareness of modern slavery, a week of hurling prayer, of naming evil; of calling out a reckoning. There are still about 50 million people caught up in forced labour, sexual exploitation or human trafficking in the world. Many churches, including ours, have been praying a wave of prayer and campaigning this week.

This widow is a feisty woman. Where the judge says 'this woman keeps bothering me' - the Greek literally means "this woman is giving me a black eye".

When we pray, and never give up, we give evil a black eye; we channel God's freedom and grace into the world.



Throughout our Christian story we reflect with icons showing Mary, Jesus' mom, punching the devil in the face, or our own S. Margaret taking a hammer to him.

Throughout the ages, Christian women, like our widow – those overlooked and sidelined by society – have delivered evil a black eye. Now, we stand in their footsteps.

God is always on the side of justice and healing and hope. He's not the big important judge who hasn't got time for us unless we have a big bank balance ... he's with us on the streets – in our pains, our struggles, and our hope.

Whether that is the big injustices of the world, or the private griefs of our own individual stories

It is easy to think we cannot make a difference, but Jesus assures us that *in him* we are never powerless, however immovable the world may seem. Just think of the #MeToo campaign, or Malala Yusafa, or Rosa Parkes – women no one would expect to have a voice, changing the world.

Ely, a big council estate just outside Cardiff, is a very deprived area, and most people pretty much write it off. There have been various council or charity initiatives, but they kept folding through lack of funding, compounding Ely's feeling of abandonment and hopelessness.

I spent some time working in a community hub there – a place where people could come for a subsidised café, free food, assistance on getting jobs, second hand clothing and free tool hire, wellbeing support, training for jobs, various skills and crafts workshops – you name it, they do it. But how...?

When the final council project folded, a very few people in Ely decided to run it themselves – they created a community development project, called the Dusty Forge, run by some community funding, and lots of volunteers. Volunteers were reluctant at first. In an area like that with the prospects you have, people don't have a lot of energy, or confidence. But slowly it grew, and today it thrives – people whom everyone overlooked, growing in strength together.

I remember one woman who had just begun running the new café – after helping out in other areas in the hub. I asked her how she had come to be there. Well, she said, she struggled with her physical and mental health, she had no qualifications, and she would just stay in bed or sit on the sofa all day, but her sister suggested she came to help one day. It took a huge effort to get out of the house... but now, she had found that each step she took she became stronger. And now she wanted to help others. She couldn't have done it, she said, without all of us at the Dusty.

The Dusty is not a Faith project, but it won't surprise you to know that many of the original few volunteers were Christians, and that faith tends to spring up amongst those who come. When I left, I know that they put in place an official Chaplaincy, which is a treasured part of the various support and provision one can find there. Now, the Dusty Forge works alongside the council and advises and assists *them* in the work in the wider city as well as supporting its own community.

Be persistent, says Paul to Timothy in our epistle reading today – in season and out of season, never give up, because God is with you. And in you.

And that can mean standing up for truth and love in a world that is ever caught up in fears and angers. It can mean being persistent in speech, and persistent in hearing – resolutely looking to those whose voices are not heard, and making space for them, joining our voices to them if we need to.

Sisters and brothers, let us on this resurrection day be *Rising Strong* – ready to Rumble, let us put on the armour of prayer.

Let us claim life, for ourselves and for each other, persistent, and never giving up. Taking strength in the knowledge that in Jesus, the chrysalis of the Tomb of Easter has already broken open, and in that grace all wings can stretch, chains fall off, and flight by flight, heart by heart, freedom will cover the earth in clouds of glory.

Amen