



A couple of weeks ago we went to see a play at the Old Rep theatre in Birmingham. It was a musical version of *The Silver Sword* - a book I read and loved when I was a teenager. I don't know if anyone else has read it? It's really good - well worth reading.

The story follows four young Polish children during the Second World War. Their mother and father have gone - arrested, or worse - they don't know. Now they are living in Warsaw, in the cellar of a bombed out house. Ruth - 15 - acts as mother - and teacher to a little school of other children living among the shattered streets. Edek - a year younger, is the one trying to find food - and getting involved with the Polish resistance. Little Bronia loves drawing, on any paper she can find - although when her

pictures aren't full of fairytale princesses they are full of sad images of soldiers, war and destruction.

One day the children meet the fourth child - a wild teenager called Jan, whose only friend is a viscous cockerel called Chimp. Jan is always arguing - and often stealing - but he cares for the girls in his own way - especially when Edek has been caught on a resistance operation and they are on their own.

One day the box of treasures that Jan always keeps close to him falls open, and Bronia spots something - a little paperknife in the shape of a miniature sword - the Silver Sword. Bronia recognises it and then Jan remembers - he was given this treasure by a man he met among the ruins - a man who told him to look out for three children - these children! And with the sword came a message. If Jan meets the children he must tell them to head for Switzerland, they will all meet up there.

So now the children have a dream to live for. If they can only get to Switzerland then they will see, they hope, their father, and their mother, once again. The book - and the play - follows their journey of over 1000 miles, travelling from a city and a country torn apart by war, heading for a place where they can have a new life.

Watching the children's desperate journey - the search for food, and a safe place to sleep - the times when they are

split up and in despair - the places where they are in great danger - the threats, even near their destination, to send them back to their ruined home - I think all our thoughts turned to the journeys that we have seen on the news recently- families who have escaped from other devastated towns and cities in our own times - families desperately in search of a new home.

Ian Serrailler, who wrote the book, based it on the real Red Cross records of four separate children, although there was one change. Sadly, the boy whose story was the one he gave to Edek didn't just catch TB in a Germany labour camp - he died of TB as well. The whole story is a reminder of how desperate it is for people caught up in war - soldiers, and civilians - men, women and children - people whose country is no longer a peaceful place to live, but a battleground where hunger, fear and death are around every corner.

There's a line in one of the songs:
'Though everything we know
is blown into a million tiny parts,
somehow we still hold on
to who we are deep within our hearts'.

What kept the children going on their long journey was a dream - the dream that one day they would know a better life. Bronia drew pictures of the mountains in Switzerland - a place where war could not reach, where she would

know peace and safety - a bit like the picture Isaiah paints in our first reading. Maybe some of the families travelling across Europe today talk together in the same way, about the new life that they imagine in the place where they are heading.

Dreams like that can make a difference. The dream of a better life and a better world have often kept people going - including people struggling to build that better world, like Martin Luther King in America, or Nelson Mandela in South Africa.

Dreams of a time when the fighting would end gave hope and strength to many who fought in the First and Second World Wars. That's why people loved the songs sung by Dame Vera Lynn - 'There'll be blue birds over the white cliffs of Dover'. We don't really have bluebirds in our country - but it's a dream - a dream of a better time, a time of 'love and laughter, and peace ever after - tomorrow, when the world is free'.

Today, thanks to those who fought for that freedom, including those who gave their lives - we are 'living the dream'. We live here in the land they dreamed of - a land of peace, where we can enjoy love and laughter without the fear and loss and destruction that war brings. We are incredibly fortunate. Fortunate to be living in this time and in this country - when other people around the world live in countries caught up in war and conflict. We have a lot

to give thanks for, each day. And today we especially stop to remember and to give thanks for those who gave their lives so that we can live this life - so that we can live their dream.

In the story of The Silver Sword the four children are helped on their way by different people, people who help them to keep their dream alive. Ivan, the Russian soldier - attacked by Jan and by Chimpny the cockerel but still finding them supplies and shoes for their journey. Kurt - the German farmer who with his wife hides the children from the Burgomaster. Joe, the American GI, who picks up the children in his truck when Edek's strength has given out...

At the end of the play, the most moving scene was when the children were reunited with their mother and father - and Jan, always so independent and angry, is finally hugged by their mother and bursts into tears. Now he too has been included in the children's dream.

Thinking about that story makes me wonder if there are ways that we can help some of those whose lives have been devastated - help them as they try to find their longed for dream. The news in the last few months about the huge refugee crisis has brought many reactions. There are different views about what action should be taken. There will be different views among us here. But what it has begun to do for us as a church is to open our eyes to

something which is already going on - to bring something to our attention which many of us have managed to miss.

There has been no big new influx of refugees here in our area, but there are already a number of families fleeing dangerous countries. There are about 400 families seeking asylum in Wolverhampton at the moment - some of them have been here asking to be granted asylum for some time. Each of these families have their own stories of loss, and fear, and hope and dreams.

We have begun to find out about the sorts of needs some of these families have, through a few folks from here who are already involved. Some of us are going to find out more about how we as churches can support them at a meeting in Wolverhampton in a couple of weeks' time - the one mentioned on the newsheet. Maybe in some small ways we can learn how to offer support and friendship to help keep their dreams and hopes alive.

We won't all have this opportunity to help refugees - but we all know people whose lives are pretty desperate, who face loneliness or fear, illness or financial worries - people who dream that their life might be different. There will be someone you can think of who is really struggling at the moment - a person, young or old, who needs someone to come alongside, to show them love and give them practical help, to keep their hope alive.

We each have dreams about our life and what it could be. God also has a dream for us and for our lives. In our second reading there was a great song of praise spoken, we're told, by a man called Zechariah. He was the father of John the Baptist - and John was the one, you may remember, who grew up into a prophet and stood out in the desert telling everyone about the one to come - preparing the way for Jesus.

Zechariah looks down at this newborn child, like many a new father or mother, and he wonders about the life that John will live. And he is given a vision of God's dream for this boy and what he will become:

'You, my son, will be called prophet of God in heaven above. You will go ahead of the Lord to get everything ready for him. You will tell his people that they can be saved when their sins are forgiven.

God's love and kindness will shine upon us
like the sun that rises in the sky.
On us who live in the dark shadow of death
this light will shine
to guide us into a life of peace.'

John will have a special role in announcing the new beginning that Jesus will bring - but God also has a dream for each one of us - a dream that will see us living lives of

hope and love and generosity and joy - as they sang in the very last lines of the last song of The Silver Sword:

To make a better world for everyone
we all must play our part
And keep alive the flame of hope
that burns deep within our hearts.

God longs to help each of us to live the dream - to live his dream for us. If we can learn to do that, then his light can shine out through us into other peoples' lives, to help them also live the dream - and so, in small but real ways we too can be part of making God's dream for his world become more of a reality, lived out in love and kindness and hope and peace.