

2nd February 2024

Sinking

"Forever sinking and sinking ..."

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Evangeline*

From time to time, I have a sinking feeling. The mechanics of my desk chair have become unpredictable. Its height is set for good ergonomics and comfort as I work away. But, in a random fashion, and with no warning, the seat sinks down, such that I end up closer to the edge of my desk than my laptop screen. I pump it up, of course, and, for a while, all is well. And then ... Oops! I have that sinking feeling again. I'm resolved, at some point, to do something about mending my chair. But till I get around to that, I'll have to cope with that occasional sinking feeling.

While dealing with the vagaries of an unpredictable chair may be amusing and not a little annoying, we all know "that sinking feeling", in work, faith and the complexities of living: a task going along well, only to be scuppered by an unforeseen problem, such that all your work is wasted; poor relationships in a congregation that you work hard to resolve, only to find that they raise their heads again; a world in apparent turmoil, when we're trying to absorb one international crisis, only to find that yet another has hit the news. Yes, indeed, we all know about "that sinking feeling".

But spare a thought for those whose sinking feeling isn't an occasional intrusion into an otherwise stable life but is something they have to live with on a permanent basis, so that they have a sense that they are "forever sinking and sinking". Thomas Carlyle, in *Past and Present*, written in 1843, reflects on the plight of immigrants living in squalor in the slums of 19th century Edinburgh. He tells of one "poor Irish widow" who pleads for understanding and charity from the good folk of the city:

The forlorn [woman] applies to her fellow-creatures, as if saying, "Behold I am sinking, bare of help: ye must help me! I am your sister, bone of your bone; one God made us: ye must help me!" They answer, "No ... thou art no sister of ours."

Here is a woman, sinking into a pit of despair, crying for help, and receiving only indifference. Carlyle tells us that she died soon afterwards of typhus.

If you and I know what "that sinking feeling" is like – desk-chair included – might we be more aware of those around us who have that sinking feeling *all* the time, whose cries we've been inclined to ignore?

A prayer for today

Lord, as I sink, help me up again. And, as others sink, help me to help them. Amen