It sometimes feels as if every part of the calendar has been allocated to a particular theme or event; every week we are enjoined to awareness of some cause; every day has its own hashtag on Twitter. I wrote this sermon on Thursday, which was National Poetry Day. Friday – which in a Christian calendar marks the feast of St Francis of Assisi – was World Animal Day; today is National Badger Day. Many of these can and should make us laugh – I am particularly fond of International ‘Buy a priest a beer day’, which falls in early September. But many have much more serious purpose and should cause us to stop and reflect on matters to which we might remain oblivious.

I came to this morning’s readings having been following a conversation on social media between some of my curate friends about planning special services for Baby Loss Awareness week, which runs from 9 to 15 October. This is run by a group of national charities including Sands, the Stillbirth and neonatal death society, and is designed to help bereaved parents, their families and friends, unite with others to commemorate their babies’ lives. There’s a similar organisation called ‘Saying goodbye’, which offers support for those who suffered the loss of a baby during pregnancy, at birth or in infancy and holds special services of remembrance each year. We held one such service in the Cathedral in July.

With my mind focused on the loss of babies, I was drawn immediately to verses from both of our readings. God’s statement to Israel that he will never forget – ‘See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hand’ – and Jesus’ assurance that ‘even the hairs of your head are all counted’. An academic colleague of mine, announcing to his wide circle of acquaintance that his baby had just died, reported the bleak and devastating news, and then quoted that verse: ‘even the hairs of your head are all counted’. For him and his wife
that clearly provided some comfort. Those who have suffered early pregnancy loss may find it more difficult to hold onto the verse literally, especially when well-meaning people try to tell you that it wasn’t your ‘baby’ that just died, merely a collection of cells. (I can assert, from my own experience, that that is not a helpful thing to say.) But that verse from Isaiah speaks very powerfully.

This passage comes in the portion of Isaiah commonly called ‘Second Isaiah’, which dates from the later part of the period when Judah was in exile in Babylon. Writing about 200 years after the first Isaiah, this writer drew on the earlier prophet’s tradition to offer a new message of comfort, hope and the promise of return. He tried to lift the exiles out of the lethargy of despair into which they had fallen, by promising that God would free his people from their bondage and lead them back home to Canaan. Our reading is part of a longer dialogue, ostensibly between God and his people. In the passage we heard, the prophet offered a brief hymn of praise in support of the God who comforts his people, to which Zion – personified as a woman – responded that she could not share in singing such praise. Singing the Lord’s song in a strange land was too hard; she did not feel comforted, nor was she sure about God’s compassion. She felt forsaken, abandoned, forgotten in her grief.

We can readily respond to this sentiment, one that is commonly articulated by those who have been bereaved, perhaps especially bereaved parents. In the agony of loss, it is very hard to hold onto faith in a God who could have ‘allowed’ (in inverted commas) such a thing to happen. Grief is always a very lonely place. It can often feel like a kind of exile. Each of us can tell stories about how isolated we have felt after a death, remembering the friends who crossed to the other side of the road rather than confront us because they didn’t know what to say, as well as of the emptiness we felt within ourselves. Other people get tired of the fact that you are hurting and suffering; they pull away and seem to forget. But God never forgets. That’s the message at the heart of this portion of our reading.

God’s response to Zion’s cry of pain is to liken himself to a mother, asking rhetorically, can a woman forget her nursing-child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? We want to answer no – not least for the physiological reason that it is painful to allow too long to pass between feeds if you are breastfeeding. Yet, it is not true in real life that no mothers ever abandon their children; we know that some mothers fail to show compassion for their children, and treat them abusively, doing them physical as well as emotional harm. But if that’s what we are now thinking, then Isaiah adds these words
from the Lord; ‘Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.’ God will never weary of our tears, or our loneliness, or our complaining. God is faithful. He is always there, walking alongside those who suffer, sharing in their grief.

And he is there with each of us personally, as individuals – not just as part of the great mass of humanity. ‘See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hand.’ We have an eternal reminder of God’s own divine means of remembrance. Each of us is written on his hands, hands that will in the end bring us to salvation.

One of the difficulties of helping and supporting parents who have experienced loss in early pregnancy – or indeed at any point in a pregnancy up to the moment when, in law, the dead child can be described as ‘stillborn’, which in this country is after 20 weeks’ gestation – is how to help them to grieve if they can’t have a funeral. Close friends of mine lost their second child at 19½ weeks, and one of the most awful things about what was a dreadful time for them was that their daughter was not deemed to have been stillborn. They were denied both a death certificate (and with it the opportunity formally to give her a name) and the proper funeral that they would have been able to have had she lived for just another few days. This was some time ago, and hospital policies have changed considerably in recent years, so that the remains of pregnancies that ended too early are not disposed of in the way they once were. The church has also got a lot better at handling this issue than it used to be, and now offers parents funerals for babies who died before 20 weeks if they want them (not everyone does).

Occasions such as the saying goodbye service, or those ‘Wave of light’ services that my friends are currently planning for this coming week, offer gentle liturgical ways of remembering lost babies. Such events are designed to speak directly to families who have no church connections and little Christian vocabulary; they involve a good deal of silence, some lighting of candles and reading out of names in the hope that simple actions and shared grief may convey a message of resurrection, love and hope. As one friend put it, our aim must be to take the pressure off a bit, it’s not the words themselves that matter so much as the atmosphere we create, and the fact that we cared enough to hold the service at all.

As clergy, we all struggle with how to respond to grieving parents’ questions about where their baby is now, and whether she is in God’s hands. If you have just buried a baby whom you held in your arms and nursed, you can take much consolation from Jesus’ words to his disciples about God’s care for the whole of Creation, his assertion that even
the hairs of your head are all counted, even therefore, the hairs of your dead baby’s head have been counted.

To make that point, Jesus drew a comparison with sparrows. Sparrows are small, quite insignificant birds; they like to live in company and to nest in hedges or bushes, in the eaves of houses or other little nooks and crannies. Sleeping in my mother’s house in Cumbria earlier in the summer I was kept awake by the insistent cheeping of birds; investigation in daylight revealed that a pair of house sparrows had built a nest in the open end of the pipe that carries the bathroom extractor fan out into the garden, an outlet close to the head of our bed. In Jesus’ day, sparrows were not thought birds of importance, their lack of material worth indicated how society viewed them. Yet, in God’s eyes they are precious. And we, we are yet more precious in God’s sight: ‘you are of more value than many sparrows, even the hairs of your head are counted’.

But that doesn’t really help me, or other women who lost babies long before they had formed heads on which hairs might grow. And that brings me back to Isaiah’s promise of attentiveness to each and every one of us. I will not forget you; see I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands. The intimacy of that promise – that the Creator of the universe has such a deeply personal relationship with each of us, with every conceived being – draws us into an intense bond with our maker.

We, all of us, and all our babies that did not live to draw breath, are remembered and inscribed on the hands of the God of tender care, who like a mother never forgets his children, but comforts and quiets all who are restless and fearful. We may rejoice in the security that comes from knowing that we are written on the palms of God’s outstretched hands, hands that in time will welcome us home, to the kingdom of Christ, where peace and justice reign, where mourning, crying and pain will be no more.

AMEN