

Share stories

Readings: Genesis 12:1 - 7 & Luke 9:18-27

This morning I want to start by talking about our stories then go on to talk about God's story and finally how God's story can become our story.

Let's begin with **our stories**. It's when we share our stories with one another that we begin to really understand and appreciate one another and so build community. As a parish nominator I was invited to Brenda Page's house group the other week. Towards the end of the discussions someone said to me she appreciated that I speak slowly when I lead the 9am service. There is a reason for that and it goes back to my story as a child; for you see when I was a young boy I stuttered badly. A kindly teacher took me aside and told me about taking a deep breath before I began to speak. For many, if not all of us, things that have happened to us in the past have had a profound effect upon our subsequent lives. When we tell those stories others can begin to understand more about us. It builds bonds of love when we find we are accepted by one another, even if we have done things of which we are now embarrassed or even ashamed. Our bonds of love can also be strengthened as we celebrate each other's achievements.

But there is deeper aspect of stories, they shape us. Michael Raiter at the recent GAFCON 2018 Conference in Jerusalem told about a Chinese couple coming to study in Sydney. They were atheists but came under the sound of the gospel and became Christians. Michael asked the man what had changed since he became a Christian; the man replied "I used to hate Japanese people and now I love them". He had been born 30 years after World War 2 ended but he had been brought up on the stories of the Sino-Japanese war when over 6 million Chinese lost their lives amid terrible atrocities perpetuated by the Japanese army. That story had been replaced by the Jesus story which had reshaped his attitudes and prejudices and his hatred had turned to love. The Jesus story had touched him deeply and emotionally. Stories shape us.

When we come to church we are reminded of **God's story**, God's metanarrative that stretches from Genesis to Revelation – a love story of God for His creation and particularly for mankind.

We don't hear this story anywhere else, perhaps at one time we did when Christianity was more accepted and mainstream. Now we hear a different story coming from the world around us, our culture, it's all about anything other than God. This is why it is so important to keep reminding ourselves of God's story; when we gather as church, as a house group or when we read the Scriptures by ourselves. I am reminded of the old hymn "Tell me the old, old story". Perhaps a bit hackneyed for this age but it has the ring of truth about it. It begins with "Tell me the old, old story, of unseen things above, of Jesus and His glory, of Jesus and His love." It goes on to say "Tell me the story slowly, that I may take it in-- that wonderful redemption, God's remedy for sin; tell me the story often, for I forget so soon, the "early dew" of morning has passed away at noon". Tell me the story often for I forget so soon. That's why we need to retell the story, we forget, it loses its glory, its bite,

its transforming power. For the story tells us something about the very character of God and who we are as the people of God.

Jean and I frequently lead a Passover service just before Easter. The Passover Haggadah is the retelling of the story of the Exodus from slavery in Egypt, a once for all deliverance event that set apart the people of Israel as the people of God. It's not a short service but typically lasts several hours. It includes a meal but also visual reminders of the story in the unleavened bread, the salt water, the bitter herbs and the haroset as a reminder of the clay they used for bricks. It's an annual reminder to each family of what God did in Egypt to rescue a nation of slaves. Even when the Jews were not actually there at the time of the first Passover, they tell the story *as if they had been there*. They relive the story as it is told. As it says in Deut. 16:3 "that all the days of your life you may remember the day when *you* came out of the land of Egypt." Remember the story of your deliverance and keep on remembering it, says God.

As Ralph Martin said "Hebrew worship was dramatic and vital, reliving the past through its creed and liturgy, and calling Yahweh's past deeds out of their "pastness" into a living present, where their saving benefits were newly appreciated and experienced." The parallels with our Communion service are obvious and we will return to that later.

Now let's have a look at our Old Testament reading. God's promise to Abram in Genesis 12 is repeated 5 times in Genesis (12:3, 18:18, 22:18, 26:4-5 and 28:14), as the story of Abram develops. It begins with God's call and Abram's obedience to up sticks, leave the familiar and comfortable, and move to somewhere that God will reveal to him. It is the beginning of the narratives of the Patriarchs leading to the emergence of Israel as the people of God.

It's noteworthy that both Mary and Zachariah in their praise songs saw the progression of their story from Abraham – God had promised and now they were living in the fulfilment of that very promise. As Mary exalts in what God is doing through her, she finishes the Magnificat by saying: "He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, *to Abraham and to his offspring forever.*" (Luke 1:54-55). Zachariah when his tongue was released, prophesied over his son John, that God had visited them "to remember his holy covenant, *the oath that he swore to our father Abraham*, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days." (Luke 1:72-75). They were living in the fulfilment of what God had promised to Abraham, that was the promise they went back to, it was still very much alive to them.

Christ or Messiah is a name of promise, the whole of the OT looked forward to Him. One of the beauties of the Service of 9 lessons and carols is that it picks out some of the key texts of the Old Testament and brings them into the celebration of the birth of Jesus, the One who was promised. It's part of God's unfolding story.

But there is something else in God's promise to Abraham in v3 "*all peoples on earth* will be blessed through you." A promise repeated to Abraham in Genesis 22:18 "through your offspring *all nations on earth* will be blessed".

How God will bless the nations is glimpsed in the rest of the Old Testament but really blossoms in the New Testament; culminating in Revelation 7:9-10 "After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from *all* tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to *our* God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

But the earlier chapters of Genesis from chapter 3 to 11 can make very bleak reading, as the human heart seems set on devising all manner of evil, contrary to the Creator's desire. Will God give up on the whole business? As Chris Wright says "The call of Abram is the beginning of God's answer to the evil of human hearts, the strife of nations and the groaning brokenness of His whole creation." (Chris Wright p199). God's call and Abram's obedience will lead to the blessing of the nations. So far the nations seem to deserve judgement but God has other intentions but God is playing a long game. Abram is called to leave Ur to be a blessing; God's story is full of exodus moments. Abram leaves Ur, his descendants through Israel leave Egypt, Jesus leaves heaven to be born on earth, Moses and Elijah discuss Jesus' exodus on the Mount of Transfiguration, in this case His death, resurrection and ascension. Our own discipleship is an exodus – leave your selfish life behind, die to your old self and rise to newness of life, following Jesus. He was sent and now He sends us, empowered by His Spirit to be like Him and to accomplish His work in the world. As Alan Hirsch succinctly puts it "One of the best ways of thinking about discipleship is that it means to seek to do the same things that Jesus did for the same reasons that he did them."

Jesus invites us to enter into His story, not just to know about it, nor even to give mental assent to it – but to become part of the story, to enter into what God is doing now, so that God's story becomes our story. Jesus calls us to follow Him, to join with Him in what He is doing in the world, to become God's fellow workers to make the kingdom of God manifest to this world in the here and now.

This is why discipleship is so important to the life of the church. We are now part of God's story, we are incorporated by faith into God's story and by His grace and the work of His Spirit He weaves us into His story. Discipleship is not just about an initial repentance and acknowledgement of the Lordship of Christ, but a lifelong, daily walk of self-denial. The words of Jesus in Luke 9 to those who would follow Him are stark and dramatic, almost brutal. "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." (v23). As Leon Morris said "There is nothing self-indulgent about being a Christian." But Jesus says this is the way you will find real life, however countercultural it may seem.

By entering into God's story we get a new identity. We hear much in this age of the importance of identity. Where, as Christ's followers, do we get our identity from?

From being “in Christ”! Old labels and descriptions of us are now subservient to the fact that we are in Christ – Jesus is Lord, not the old labels and stories that held us in their sway. All one in Christ Jesus, the old barriers of separation have gone, we are one in Christ Jesus, with His lordship overriding whatever gave us a sense of identity before – we now have a new identity. As Billy Bray the Cornish saint said – now I am the child of the King. That was his identity, not the fact that he was a poor Cornish tin miner. He had spent much of his time in his unconverted state in telling lies to his friends for fun, but now he could tell them a new tale about heavenly truths, and what the Lord had done for him.

Each time we hear those words “In the night that He was betrayed he took bread” Jesus invites us to enter afresh into His story, to bow the knee to the exalted Christ and to follow Him with renewed strength and passion. We could just stand outside the story, admiring it from afar, acknowledging the great teaching of Jesus but He invites us to enter into His story, to let that story transform us by His Spirit as we take and eat the bread and drink the wine. We need the reminder often for we forget so soon.

So we have looked at our stories, at God’s story and how we can become part of God’s story, as individuals and together as a local church. May God’s story energize us, as we abide in Him and bear fruit to His glory. Amen.

Reflection questions:

- 1) What stories have shaped your life?
- 2) How has the gospel story brought a new story to your life?
- 3) Jesus invites us to follow Him. How do we therefore enter into His story?
- 4) How do we together remind ourselves of God’s story?