

“Are you sitting comfortably; then I’ll begin”. We all love a good story. I remember as a child listening to my mother as she read us the *Wind in the Willows*, the *House at Pooh Corner* and other favourites. Later on I devoured *Just William*, *Biggles*, *Alice through the Looking Glass*, *Brendon Chase*. Think too of the classic fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen and the Brothers Grimm that tap into fantasy and myth. Then there’s Dickens and Jane Austen and Galsworthy, not to mention le Carre and Fleming, Agatha Christie and Dorothy L.Sayers. All these storytellers, and of course many more, take us out of ourselves into a journey of discovery. We immerse ourselves in their worlds and the characters they create, and so are able to explore more about ourselves and the meaning of our lives.

The Bible is one of the great stories, perhaps even the greatest. It tells the story of God’s dealings with humanity. At its heart is a People, the Children of Israel, and the Old Testament recounts how their relationship with God develops as he calls them out of Egypt and leads them to the Promised Land. Often they fall short, and have to be recalled to their true path by the prophets. Disastrously, their land is conquered and they are taken into exile in Babylon. After many years some return and re-establish themselves in their land. The Old Testament gives us all sorts of glimpses into their thinking and hoping, their yearning and their striving, their failures and successes. As we follow their story, we are shown how faith grows.

And then Jesus. The Gospels tell the story of how he fulfilled his God-given purpose. We hear his parables, witness his healings, listen in to his conversations with his followers, his disputes with the Jewish and Roman authorities, and follow his final arrest and crucifixion, and his miraculous resurrection and all that flowed from it; and then the way his first followers responded to what had happened to them. How they found themselves having to revise their understanding of God and his purposes in the light of the resurrection. No wonder a film version of Jesus’ life was called “The Greatest Story Ever Told”.

St Paul, of course, played an important part in all this, as he tells us in today’s reading. He tells us how he was called and how his life was turned upside down as a

result. From being a persecutor of the Church he became one of her chief advocates. He shows us that the Gospel should never be something that is outside of us. The lesson of St Paul's life and teaching is that, above all, we are called to experience the good news personally. It is a continuing story in which we have our own part to play. We are not to be mere observers, but actual participants. We are crucified with Christ and we rise with him. And as players in the continuing drama of the Gospel, we need to be aware of what is being played out in us through our own particular journey of faith.

I learnt this for myself a few years ago when I was encouraged to write down the important moments in my own life's journey. I was told to include the particular people who had influenced me at different stages, together with places that had special meaning for me, moments of particular joy and sadness, success and failure. I was encouraged to reflect on how things had turned out over time, and to discern any patterns and repetitions in my personal history. It felt like a fairly daunting challenge, and indeed it took some time to complete. But when it was done, I came to recognize firstly how fortunate I had been in the family and friends who had supported me at every stage in my life. Secondly how times that had first of all felt like defeats or failures were often the occasions when new insights and new opportunities were planted. And thirdly, I realized that things tended to go sour when I turned in on myself, and tended to be more creative when I looked outwards.

Of course these particular insights were nothing special; probably I should have learned them long before. But what made the difference was that now they had become first-hand because I could see them through the lens of my own experience. They were the fruit of my own story. And what is more, my story was clearly bound up in the larger story of the gospel. What I was acknowledging was the Christ had been with me, born in me throughout my journey. That the things that felt like defeat and death were not necessarily the end, but had been the source of new beginnings and new opportunities; and that throughout my journey it had been the support and encouragement of others that had sustained me and kept me safe. Christmas, Good Friday, Easter and Pentecost were not just events in the past, but were now being lived out within my own personal experience.

Each of us has our own story to explore and to learn from. The question is whether we can accept how important our role is. I sometimes hear people make comments like, "I'm just an ordinary person; I've nothing special to contribute." If that is what you think about yourself, I have to tell you that you are gravely mistaken. You are making light of your own special story, one that is unique to you. Whether you realize it or not, you are playing down the special role of the particular people who have been given to you, the particular events and experiences that only you have lived through, and the particular gifts and insights that only you can offer. Of course, the starting point is to realize your own worth in God's eyes. And then, in order to appreciate the way God has worked - and indeed is still working - in your life, it's a matter of reflecting on your personal story. Which means that you need to spend some time thinking over your own life-journey, and where and how God has been with you in it. It may be helpful to record on paper what you have lived through as a way of externalising your experiences and getting a perspective on them. This is one of the most fruitful ways that your faith can grow in knowledge of God's engagement with you and your place in the wider community of faith.

One result will be that you will come to be profoundly thankful, as you recognize more clearly God's presence in the woof and warp of your daily life. And as you see how God has been present in your story, you will be able to trust him with your future. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and for ever, so your future - whatever it may hold - can be handed over to him with confidence for he has already shown how lovingly and compassionately he has cared for you from childhood.

So pay attention to your personal story. Cherish it. For the more you reflect on your story, from the earliest years to the present time, the more you will discern God's presence in your life. And of course, the more you recognize his loving presence and power in your own life, the more you will recognize him and appreciate him in other people.

Thanks be to God, each one of us has a special story to tell, full of richness, variety, miracle, wonder, transformation. Of the telling of our stories there can be no end because our story is God's story in us and it continues into eternity.

