

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
01/10/2023
St Cuthbert's Anglican Church – Tweed Heads

Exodus 17: 1-7	Water from the Rock
Psalm 78: 1-4, 11-16	Remember God's miracles – He parted the Red Sea - He brought water from the Rock
Philippians 2: 1-13	Look at Jesus example He humbled himself, but is Lord of All
Matthew 21: 23-32	Challenge by leaders to Jesus' Authority Parable of the Two Sons

Introduction

Today I'd like to look at the power of Story, and how our Christian story might affect our Christian life. Now when I say story, I'm not talking about something made up. I'm talking about something we have experienced, which becomes something we can pass on.

In our Exodus reading we hear part of the story of the Jewish faith. We hear how in the journey through the desert from Egypt to the Promised Land, Moses strikes the rock with his staff and through God's Power provides water for the Israelites. The psalm repeats this story to keep alive the Israelites faith in God.

In our Philippians reading and Matthew's Gospel we continue to hear the story of Jesus, recorded so that people will believe and continue to have faith in Jesus, and in what he has done for us.

Story

If we look at our own lives, our story defines who we are.

In meetings, or training sessions where groups of people who don't know each other come together, the leader often uses the method of going around the group to have everyone introduce themselves. You might be asked to tell everyone your name, where you live, what your job is, and what you hope to get out of the course. As you go around the group you get to see the different people. You see what they look like, you hear who they are, and you start to get a better picture of who that person might be. Now obviously this doesn't mean that we now know the person, but it gives us an insight into who they are, and what they might be like.

Likewise reading the gospels will help to give us a picture of who Jesus is, but it doesn't give us a relationship with Jesus. Unless we hear the story though, we can't make the connection.

Sharing our Story

So how do we develop this relationship with Jesus?
How does the hearing of the Story develop into the Faith?

I believe, more often than not, it occurs when other Christians share the story of their faith journey with us. Their story isn't what our faith becomes, but it does help shed light on who Jesus is, and how we might develop our own relationship with him.

For those of you who have heard of the Alpha course, I believe this aspect of story, is one of the reasons why it has become so successful at bringing people to Jesus. The speaker on the video Nicky Gumbel fills the talks, not only with stories of his own journey in faith, but he also uses the stories of many other people. He tells stories that people can relate too.

Stories can be very powerful in helping to develop and maintain our faith. And it is Good to hear the Stories of others, but for it to become real for us, it has to become part of our story. The relationship with Jesus has to be real for us.

I remember a Guy from Brisbane, Mark Gladman who taught about Youth, and ministry with youth. He said one thing they could spot a mile off, is that if you were not real. That is if you were trying to act in a certain way at youth group and church, and yet were somewhat different during the week. I think the idea he was trying to get across was that to be a successful youth group leader, or in any capacity I suppose, to help others to develop their own relationship with Jesus, you have to be able to show them that with the story of your own life.

I believe I was very lucky in that regard, as I grew up as a member of a Christian Church. There were people around me who had a relationship with Jesus. I'd have to say it was mainly through my mother sharing the story of her faith, that my own faith developed. It was through the relationship that she had, that I began to develop a relationship with Jesus for myself.

Philippians

I'd now like to look a little into the story of Jesus that we've heard in the Epistle and Gospel this morning. In Paul's letter to the Philippians we hear an almost creedal statement about who Jesus is. In his request to get them to imitate Christ's humility, he sets out the truth about Jesus which is very much like the story of the suffering servant from Isaiah 53. Paul sees Jesus as God, as a man and as Lord.

And I'd like to look at each of the three parts that relate to this:-

Firstly, we hear in verse 6:-

who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited.

Here we see very clearly that Jesus always existed with God, and is equal to God because he is God.

And in verses 7 and 8 we hear:-

but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross.

In this we hear that although Jesus is God, he became a real live human being. He did this to fulfill God's plan of salvation for all people. He died on the cross for our sins so that we wouldn't have to face eternal death.

And then we hear in verses 9, 10 and 11:-

Therefore, God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

In this we hear of the risen Jesus, whom the Father has glorified and who will reign as our Lord and Judge.

Paul is passing on here, the true story of Jesus to the Philippians. He does this to both encourage and strengthen them in their faith.

Matthew's Gospel - Parable

And now let's look at Matthew's Gospel. It comes in two parts.

Firstly, we hear the Chief Priests and the Elders challenge Jesus authority. They are trying to trap him by asking him from where his authority comes. Instead of answering their question directly and falling into their trap, he answers them with a question of his own. He asks them what appears to be an unrelated question about John the Baptist. They then become the ones trapped, and so they answer, "we don't know".

But Jesus doesn't leave it at that.

In the second part of the gospel reading, We hear Jesus tell them a story. We call it a parable. It's the parable of the two sons. He aims this parable directly at the Religious Leaders. In this story Jesus is comparing and contrasting the actions of the two sons to make a point. A father has two sons, and he asks them both to go and work in his vineyard. One son says no – but then changes his mind and works.

The other son says yes – but then doesn't go.

He then puts it to the religious leaders.

"Which of the two did what his father wanted?"

And they are forced to answer - the one who ended up doing the will of the father.

Jesus then shows them that the story is about them.

The prostitutes and the tax collectors are like the son who did the will of the father. They listened to John the Baptist. In their lives they weren't initially following God, they were people who'd done the wrong thing, but they took on the message of John the Baptist repented and changed their lives. In this they are like the son who initially says no, but then repents and works in the field. Just like his life is transformed, their lives are transformed for good and towards God.

The Religious Leaders on the other hand are like the son who originally said yes, but then failed to come good.

They have been brought up in the Jewish faith to know God, yet they become bound up in their own rules. They too heard the message of John the Baptist, but failed to respond.

By their failure to respond they alienated themselves from God.

Conclusion

I'd like to close by posing a few questions for us to think about.

How does the story of this person Jesus fit into our lives?

Did we begin a relationship with him by ourselves, or was it through the stories of others, who shared with us, that our faith was developed?

And how do we react to the story of Jesus in our lives now?

Is it like the religious leaders, who followed the rules, but disregarded message of John the Baptist?

Or are our lives transformed like the Tax collectors and the prostitutes?

I pray that as part of this faith community our lives will continue to be transformed. And that our relationships with Jesus will be so transforming that we will be enabled to share the story of our faith, just like others have with us. Amen.