

Sermon St Edmunds 21st August 2022

Hebrews 12:18-end, Luke 13:10 -17

In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

I think one of the most important things in life are stories. Obviously, some way after food, water shelter etc, the act of enjoying and telling stories is pretty important. Obviously the first thing I think of are the stories in books. Well I would say that, wouldn't I? I can't honestly remember a time before books in my life, reading and absorbing stories, being transported to other times, other people, seeing the world through other eyes.

Don't worry, I'm not going to ask for a show of hands as to who has got lost in a story. Apart from anything else, I think you can get caught up in stories apart from reading them – stories can be heard on audio books, radio, watched on television, on films, in the theatre. Stories are all around us.

After all, stories in ancient times were community events, with story tellers travelling to tell or sing songs of great events, heroic stories, traditions and explanations for the world. In Orkney, like in many places, there are story telling events not only for children, but also adults. It's probably the nearest thing to how they would be in societies where most people couldn't read, or did not have access to books.

We all tell stories to each other. We may call them anecdotes, memories, jokes, tales of experiences. My story of writing this talk was a bit like that – I drafted the plan (yes, there is a plan) went to begin typing it into my laptop, and tsk, my laptop wouldn't turn on. Well, I had been expecting it – the letters were worn off the keyboard so everything was a feat of memory, so I had to buy a new one. Fortunately, I could call in an IT expert in the shape of son Harry, but when we went into the first shop they didn't have the model I wanted, and the second had stopped selling laptops. So one quick click and collect later, I picked up Poppy, my new digital friend. It only took an evening for Harry to set it up – with everyone keeping calm and trying to remember passwords. I thought I could be back home early yesterday – but then the only lift in the hotel broke, and I was stuck in our room. Without my new laptop. After a quick bit of room service bacon sandwiches, I was released to go on my way rejoicing. And working out how to type this talk.

See - a story. With drama, twists and surprises. I'm sure you were all there, munching those sandwiches?

Most of the bible, both Old and New Testaments, is made up of stories. A lot are warnings, which after don't do something, tells a tale of what happened when some one did. Some try to explain how God's actions in the past can be a prediction of what is to come - the story of the ark with the animals is not only a suitable tale for children - animals going in the boat two by two etc - but also says that the world will not be destroyed by flood again according to God's promises. Now there are details of that story which are not suitable for children, but they stick in our minds in a saving act of God that has fascinated hundreds of generations.

The writer to the Hebrews recalls stories of rules being broken, like an animal who went onto the holy mountains being stoned. Many of the stories used in the letter to the Hebrews are recalling how the chosen people of God, the Israelites, behaved, chose to follow God or not, and what happened. Last week it was the Greatest Hits of the Old Testament, the prophets and so on, now the stories are turned into a warning that God can shake the world and heaven, but that the kingdom the new Christians were receiving can not be shaken.

Of course the Gospels are made up of stories of Jesus. Some have a beginning, a middle and an end - like Luke has the story of the Annunciation to Mary, the birth in Nazareth and the presentation in the temple. Jesus is often the main person in the story, reacting to what is going on and healing many people. He also is recorded as telling many stories himself - Luke also has Jesus telling the story of the Good Samaritan in answer to a question, a story that has entered popular culture, as any helper of people is instantly labelled a "Good Samaritan". Jesus it would seem knew the power of a good story, and Luke's Gospel is full of them, like his sequel, the book of the Acts of the Apostles.

In the story in our reading today there is a scene - a synagogue where Jesus is teaching on the Sabbath, possibly telling stories. Just then a woman appears with a disability, as we would say. It has lasted eighteen years apparently, and has been uncomfortable and life limiting for all of that time we can suppose. After all this is a time when working at a desk was not an option for many and certainly not women who, unless they were very wealthy, had to do many physical tasks like washing, cooking, chasing after children, helping with the harvest from fields or the sea. The book of Ruth in the Old Testament has a young woman having to walk for a new life, then glean in fields and everything

else to survive and support her companion. So this woman not being able to stand up straight would not only have to contend with pain and discomfort, but also suffer from not being able to do many tasks. So Jesus heals her. He doesn't want to check where she comes from, her faith, her reason for being in the synagogue which was often a male domain. He simply says "Woman, you are set free from your ailment" and it works. He lays hands on her, we are told, and she is healed. Now I have problems with this in some respect – because I have had people coming up to me and telling me that they would pray for my healing, or even telling my companion in the dog collar that he hasn't prayed hard enough. I know there is healing – I saw the effects of a miraculous heart transplant – but I don't think it can only be summoned by prayer and faith in the way some people seem to think it can. I would hesitate to describe it as being set free from bondage as Jesus does here – but is it the best way to explain it?

And of course there is the other element of this reading – the instant criticism of Jesus for healing on the Sabbath. I know that the rules followed by the Jews of the time were strictly observed in many cases – they are today in Orthodox communities – but the leader of the synagogue in this story really does miss the point – criticising Jesus for healing the woman on the Sabbath. Never mind the miracle, never mind the complete change he has made – just why must it be done on the Sabbath? No wonder Jesus gets a bit cross, and argues back that even the most observant will give animals water on the sabbath, help those in need – or at least they ought to. Everyone rejoices apparently, and his critics are put to shame.

I think we often do this, we get so caught up in the detail – that we forget to praise and admire what is miraculous and wonderful in our world. So busy criticising how it is done, we forget that it is done at all. I think we need stories like this to remind us that there is a lot of good in our world, there are people doing amazing things, but that they get caught up in the politics, the distractions of "But they are doing it wrong by our standards". We need to listen, we need to understand, and we need our faith to make a difference, probably now more than ever. Amen.

Julie Barham, 20 August 2022