

**The 13<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity 2021, 11am Choral Eucharist**

**Preacher: Mrs Sam Crook,**

**Ordinand from the College of the Resurrection, Mirfield**

Once upon a time, not that long ago, in a place not far from here, there was a family; one older, one younger, the driver, the feeder, the baby, and the dog all bundled in with luggage and supplies; fidgety to be off, soon resigned to the thrum of the car and the weary length of the trip. But tantalised by the promise of golden sands, clean air and sun dancing on a sparkling sea, and soothed by the wonder of stories....

When my kids were little long car journeys were redeemed by stories, Georges Marvellous Medicine, read by June Whitfield, Harry Potter recounted by Stephen Fry, The Boy in the Dress and Mr Stink narrated by David Walliams and Matt Lucas, and many, many more. Confined to a car, with less distractions than normal, we listened to those stories with particular focus and were transported into them, we became part of them, and in a sense, they became part of us.

Jesus was a master of stories; he and his disciples knew that they conveyed deep truths which transformed lives. Today's Gospel reading is part of the story written by Mark, a great tale of the life, work, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus; a cosmic tale of life and death; sickness and health; sacrifice and ultimately glory. To talk of the Gospels as story is not to deny the truth or power of the Christian message, (after all many of the best stories are tales of real lives), but to acknowledge that narrative can be transformative.

In our secular world we see the power of narrative in advertising, where stories of success or allure or purity are attached to a product, and this story entices us to

action, to purchase and consumption. Our culture is full of stories, films novels, art, Facebook, Instagram, we swim in a world of stories and are experts at understanding narrative and grasping nuance. All stories have a subtle yet deep reaching influence on us.

In the wake of 'Me too' and the Black Lives Matter movement we have seen a growth in novels published by people whose stories have been silenced, and we are slowly hearing the stories of abused women, the queer community and people of colour. Occasionally in our culture a story is told with such force and clarity that it changes us, like David Attenborough's blue planet, or Simone Biles prioritising of her mental health at the Olympic games. Their stories have been powerful enough to change our habits, and begin to influence our actions, whether that is buying an electric car, reducing or plastic use or prioritising our mental health on a par with our physical health.

Jesus, the master story teller, the man who weaved parables that captured the hearts and minds of thousands, challenged many of the dominant narratives of his day. He rejects the pharisees' story of Holiness. For them Holiness was a tale of ancestors, ritual action, study and prayer. But Jesus takes the tradition and radically retells the tale, holiness is no longer about rituals and observance but about the heart. In this tale murder, adultery, theft are not the result of impurity that infects from outside; not like a virus that can be caught unless we follow strict precautions. Evil acts are not something that can be averted by eating ritually clean food in a ritually clean way. They are the result of defilement from within, from hearts that are not close to God. In his criticism of the Pharisees he quotes Isaiah

This people honours me with their lips,  
but their hearts are far from me;

Jesus refocuses us onto God, it is closeness to God that purifies the heart, and by implication leads to righteous action. It is God that transforms human frailty. Jesus

tells a story of relationship, of being the Son of God and us adoptive heirs to this kinship. We are children of God, and it is to God that we must be tuned: his the story of love, relationship and service to which we belong.

We learn of this story by listening to it, just as my family listened to those audio books. We listen best when we reduce distractions, making time to focus. We listen in a state of readiness knowing that things will change and our destination is ahead of us. We listen with hope and the promise of God's Glory, and little by little, by the story we are changed. Unlike the car journey to sunlit sands our faith is a lifetime's work of returning to God in prayer scripture and communion. We listen to the stories of faith year on year on year, not just on the odd car journey, but week by week, day by day. These stories afford us, not the fleeting glimpse of ourselves in the mirror that James talks about, but a habitual return to God to hear and re-hear his story for us and be shaped by it.

As our hearts hear the call of God in the stories of scripture and the saints, and in prayer; as we learn of God's nature and experience God's love we are transformed. This change will inevitably change our actions, and this is what James means when he says that we must be doers of the word. Faith- the trust and knowledge of God and God's stories, changes what we are and what we do. It transforms us little by little into people who are swift to listen and slow to anger, people who care for the widows and orphans - James' short hand for the marginalised and vulnerable in our society. God's love nurtures in us compassion for God's creation and God's people, it enables and equips us to serve them, moulding us and all creation into its perfect fullness.

Retelling and reliving the stories of faith through every liturgical season we are drawn into the mystery of Christ, transformed into his likeness, grafted into communion with God; part of his glorious story of Salvation and Redemption and Love. Amen.