

Sermon, Leith Valley July 29th The Biblical Story

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Readings; Gen 12:1-3; Rev 21:1-7

Once upon a time, there was a little boy named ... We recognise a story...

1) I want to suggest that the Bible can best be understood as a story. Not a fairy tale, or a story from far away. A true story, and one which affects us all. A real story.

The story starts with Creation. 'In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.' And so on.

But then the story goes wrong – and we have Adam and Eve in the Garden, going their own way, and choosing to sin. They are sent from the garden, from paradise.

The Bible then narrates God's story of redemption – of winning the world back. God calls Abraham – as we read in our first reading. God calls Abraham to solve the problem of Adam – to begin the process of salvation.

And then we have Abraham's descendent – Isaac and Jacob, who is renamed Israel. There are 12 sons – and they end up in Egypt. They grow to be a people – are enslaved, and then freed in the Exodus – and God enters into a covenant with them at Sinai and they receive the 10 commandments and the whole Law. They wander in the wilderness for 40 years, and then enter the promised land. Then comes the judges with their ups and downs. Then David and a golden period with Solomon. Then the northern and southern kingdoms separate and we have the emergence of the prophets. The northern kingdom is conquered by the Assyrians in 722. The southern kingdom continues but they wander from God – and are defeated by the Babylonians in 587 and sent into exile. Finally they come back, rebuild Jerusalem, but the ups and downs continue.

So how do we understand this part of the story?? God is revealing much of himself through the ways in which God interacts with the people. But primarily God is preparing a people, a people who will become Jesus' people and into which he will be born. The nation of the Jews is like a seedbed in which Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God can come with his message, can live, die for the sins of the world, and then come back to life in resurrection. So God is preparing for Jesus, through preparing a people.

Then we have life of Jesus, his death and resurrection – the centre and pivot of the story. The life of the church – in-between times between Jesus's first and second coming. And then future hope. A new heaven and a new earth. God dwelling among God's people. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and death will be no more, as we read in Revelation 21.

So the Bible is God's story. The Bible is not a jumble of different things – of history, a bit of poetry, moral lessons, comforting promises, prophecy, guiding principles and so on. It is those things, but much more too. Its not a random collection of events, ideas, thoughts. The Bible is first and foremost one story line – one plot – a fundamentally coherent story. SO:

• Creation -> Fall -> Abraham -> Egypt and the Exodus -> Sinai and the Covenant -> Promised Land -> David -> Jesus -> Revelation 21: New Heaven and New Earth

What difference does it make to view the Bible as a story?

2) Making sense of everything in the Bible Seeing the Bible as a story helps us to make sense of everything in the Bible. Seeing it as a story helps us to make sense of what we read – of the details, and all the parts of the Bible. Story of crow and fox.

A fox compliments a crow: “My you have a lovely voice; won’t you sing me a song?”
What is the meaning of this event?

The whole story: The crow sits perched high in a tree with a piece of meat. There is a famine in the forest and all the animals use different strategies in an attempt to get the meat. The fox compliments the crow. “My you have a lovely voice; won’t you sing me a song?” It opens its mouth; the meat falls out and the fox runs away with it. END An event gains its meaning from being part of a story

The event needs to be placed in the context of a whole story – and then it will make sense! By itself we can’t understand it. Similarly with the Bible – one ‘bit’ out of context, one part of the story, often doesn’t make a lot of sense. But we can make sense of the parts when we see that they belong in a story.

We can see the big picture – and how each bit fits. We can understand parts of the Bible by seeing where they belong in the story.

3) The true story of the world Christian faith says that this is the true story of the world. There are lots of alternative stories of the world out there. For example, the story that God does not exist and that human life has no purpose, no goal. That we exist entirely for ourselves. That this world and human life can be entirely explained without God. The story isn’t going anywhere. God does not exist ... best get on with life. That’s one of the key stories out there. If that is the case, then the purpose of life is to become rich or famous – or to own as much as possible, or to try to find love or happiness. To live for myself – preoccupied with me.

So we encounter other narratives, other plot lines about our lives, other stories, all the time.

How different the Biblical story is of God’s creation of the world, and God’s redemption of the world in Christ. We are then seen as God’s handiwork – made in God’s image. We have fallen from that, but God has solved the problem in Christ – and now we join in God’s work of reconciling the world to God. Which story is true? That God does not exist and we are no more than a random product of time and chance’. Or that the world is part of God’s story, and now reconciled and being reconciled to God in Christ.

They can’t both be true. They offer quite different versions of what it is to be a human being. Quite different explanations of human life.

But the true story of the whole world is this one – the story the Bible tells of creation, human rebellion, and God’s restoration. The world has come from somewhere and is going somewhere.

There's a purpose, a direction, and we become part of that. What a huge difference the different stories make. We believe that the true story is God's big story.

4) Making sense of who we are We need some form of story to make sense of our lives. To make sense of the good times, and to make sense of the hard times. If we don't have God's story as a framework, we make up one of our own – a much inferior story that won't satisfy.

We need some sense of the 'big story' of the world for our lives to really have true meaning and for the events of our lives to make sense. And the Biblical story is the fundamental story that we need in order to understand our world and ourselves.

How does this make sense of our lives? Of who we are? In the light of this story, what is it to be a human being? It is to be God's creatures – now fallen but also restored, recreated in Christ, and heading for eternal life. And the goal of our growth is to become more like Christ, the true human being.

5) Making sense of Jesus In the light of the Biblical story, we can understand who Jesus is. He is the focal point of God's purposes for humanity. He reveals to us who God is. He accomplishes God's victory over sin. He is the Creator come to fix creation, come to be the beginning of the new creation, the new world. In Jesus, God is working his purpose out for the world. He makes all the difference!

And where are we? We are between first coming and the return of Jesus. Our calling then as God's people is to witness to Jesus Christ as Lord of all of life.

6) We are part of the story I love a story I get caught up into the story – like a wonderful novel. I come to feel that characters are good friends. Come to live inside the story. Our culture loves a good story – think of Lord of the Rings, or Harry Potter or Star Wars. We're caught up into a great story. That's what we're to do with the Biblical story – to come and live in it. To see it as our own story.

And this is a drama in which we are all invited to play a part. We each have a role to play. You didn't know that all Christians are professional actors did you! We each fit into the story. The story invites us – compels us – to get involved. We each have a place within the story.

This is a huge story – it makes sense of everything! You might say, surely we're too insignificant to have a role? No! We do have a role!! We might think that our part in the story is not important – but it is! We are called into relationship with the Creator and Redeemer of the world, the great story-maker! We are called to share in God's story – and his purposes for the whole of creation. We become actors in the story!!

7) The ending! We know it will work out well! We know where it's going. We know that God will achieve his purposes in the world. Where is it heading? To the restoration of the creation to its original goodness. To eternity with God. So God's work in our world is not yet finished. God's grand purposes for his creation are on-going. There is much more to come in God's story. 'God has prepared another act in the story – which is yet to be revealed, an act unlike anything we have seen or imagined thus far, and upon which the curtain of history will never close.'

God as Author, Director, Producer...

8) Finally, God is working his purposes out in the world – even when we blow it.

God is the most amazing story-writer. As God writes the story of the world, God can cope with us as actors getting it wrong, muffing our parts, blowing our lines, walking off the stage, sabotaging the story.

Did God want Adam and Eve to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? No. But can God still work out his purposes? Yes. Did God want Israel to wander away. No! But could God still work out his purposes? Yes.

We can blow it – but God can still ‘work his purposes out’.

Its like driving in a car with a Tom Tom, or a GPS. Every so often we take a wrong turn – and then the voice of the tom tom says ‘Recalculating route’. God does that. God can work with our mistakes! God can recalculate the route!!! God can improvise

God can work us – even our mistakes – into the story of the world!

And so, May we know the great story-teller! May we know that the story makes sense of our lives. May we know Jesus, the pivot of the plot – the one who saves us all. And may we play our part in the story – knowing that God can even weave our mistakes into the great story!

To God be the glory!