

Sermon preached at Soham on 8th October 2017 – Proper 22

Psalm 19:7-14; Exodus 20:1-20; Matthew 21:33-46

Earlier this week I ran an activity looking at the “big story” of our faith. I gave out a set of cards, with names of characters from right through the Bible, from Adam through to Jesus and Peter and Paul; and I asked people to put the cards in order, in the order in which the characters come through the Bible, through the “big story” of our faith. As they did it, we talked about the individual stories of these characters and the connections between them – the stories of Noah, Elijah, Nehemiah, Deborah... the connections between Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua... between Ruth, Samuel, David, Solomon... Part of the point to all this, of course, was that although as twenty-first century Christians in England we are far removed from the stories of the Bible in geography, time and culture, yet we and they are part of the same “big story”, of the relationship between God and humankind, and so what’s in the Bible is part of our history, our faith journey, with messages and learning for us. Our gospel reading, which we’ll come to in a moment, alludes to just that. And so I want to spend a few minutes this morning in story-telling, trying to make some connections between the stories we’ve heard this morning, and the “big story” of the Bible, and our story.

One of the key things that stands out when we look at that story of the relationship between God and humankind is the way in which God’s people are called to be different, to be distinctive from those around them, and we see that in the story from which this morning’s first reading comes. To give a bit of context, Abraham is called to follow God, and he and his descendants do just that. Three generations on from Abraham, his great-grandson Joseph is sold into slavery in Egypt, where he is much respected and rises to a position of power. When there is a famine, his brothers and father and all their families join him in Egypt. Several generations later they have become a huge tribe, the Israelites, but the Egyptians have made them into slaves and are treating them increasingly badly. And so, several hundred years after the time of Joseph, Moses becomes God’s spokesman to the Egyptian Pharaoh, telling him to let God’s people go; and after a number of dramatic plagues the Israelites leave, passing on dry land through the middle of the Red Sea, which then crashes down on the Egyptians pursuing them. It’s a good story – you can read it for yourselves.

But all of that brings us to the setting for this morning’s first reading. We have a whole tribe of Israelites, hundreds of people, in the Wilderness. And there’s a lovely description of this story which says that it took one day to get the Israelites out of Egypt, but it took 40 years to get Egypt out of the Israelites. They left in a hurry, this was not a planned move. They had nothing. And they were used to being slaves. They didn’t know how to live as free people. So what happened next was that they had to start getting used to being a community of God’s people: to being a people, to being God’s people – distinctive, and to being free. They had grown up as slaves, but now they had freedom, and they had to learn what that meant, and how to use it. In particular, they had to learn to rely on God. So, in the story, we see God keeping them in the Wilderness for forty years so that they can learn how to live as God’s free people. We see God providing them with food, and with drinkable water, as they learn how to be people who trust God. We see God providing them with the Ten Commandments, and with other laws, which spell out to them how to prioritise their lives, how to live in relationship with God, and how to live as God’s people in relationship with each other.

Of course, if we read on through the rest of the story, we see that they didn’t make a very good job of living as God’s free people. There are those who really value the laws given by God, as we heard in our psalm: “The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul... making wise the simple... rejoicing the heart... enlightening the eyes...” But time and again through the Old Testament we see people doing their own thing, going their own way, sometimes because the temptation is so strong, sometimes because they’ve forgotten their calling, sometimes because they’ve been misled, sometimes because they’ve got tied up thinking that if they do all the religious rituals then these will keep them safe with God so it doesn’t matter how they live. Successive kings, judges and prophets call them back to a right relationship with God, but are often ignored or killed. The laws which were meant to give life and freedom come to

be legalistic, a burden to people. Instead of being a way of life for a saved, free people, it becomes something that oppresses people, something different to be a slave to. And this brings us to the story Jesus told in our gospel reading.

Jesus pointed people back to the spirit of the law, to the kind of life it was pointing people towards. And he summed it up by saying 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbour as yourself.' It's not about following lots of rules. It's about living loving God and loving each other. Everything else is oppressive and brings death.

You would think that people would like what Jesus said. But they didn't, because of course it's much easier to live following rules. When you're living out a relationship, living loving God and each other, it becomes complicated, messy, trying to work out what's the right thing to do and be. You have to listen to God, you can't just work it out yourself by applying a formula. And for the people who try to enforce the rules it's even worse, because they've lost their power over people. And it was this difficult situation Jesus was describing in the story he told in our gospel reading. He described a landowner who rented out his vineyard, only for the tenants to kill the servants that he sent to the vineyard, and then to kill his son. Jesus is telling the story of how God sent prophets, messengers, to remind his people to live as people who are saved, and now he himself has now come to Israel to call them to live the as people who are saved, to live as God's freed people, in relationship with God, but they won't listen to him either.

Well, that's the story. But what does it have to say to us?

I started by saying that although as twenty-first century Christians in England we are far removed from the stories of the Bible in geography, time and culture, yet we and they are part of the same "big story", of the relationship between God and humankind. The thing that stands out in this "big story" is that being God's people, being in relationship with God, isn't about doing good. If we are a group of people who do good then that's lovely, but we're no different to any number of groups in this community. The thing that makes us different is our relationship with God. The thing that makes us different is that we are Christians – Christ-followers, learners, apprentices of Jesus. When we look at the Ten Commandments, the first four of them aren't about doing good, they're about relationship with God, putting him first. When we look at Jesus' two-part summary of the law, the second part is about loving others, but the first part is about loving God with all our heart, soul and mind. Our calling is to be God's people, holy, distinctive, putting relationship with God first. That will lead to us doing good, of course it will. But it is so much more than that.

So I wonder, where are we, as individuals, and as a body, in our relationship with God? When we sang, in our first hymn, "Christ is our cornerstone, on him alone we build", is that true? Do we start with him in our decision-making, in our prioritising? When we come, later in this service, to the table to receive bread and wine, do we come to meet with God and to go away changed? When we sing, in our communion hymn, that this love of God demands our soul, our life, our all, are we willing to give that?

In Jesus' story of the tenants in the vineyard, and in the "big story" it represents and of which we are a part, where do we find ourselves? And what might we do about it?