

Sermon 24th January 2021 for Bell Road Service

When I was in Sunday School we used to sing a hymn which started with the words:

God has given us a book full of stories

Earlier in this service we heard two stories – the first the story of Jonah, the Groaner! and then from St Mark, the story of the beginning of Jesus' ministry and how he called four fishermen to follow him.

Do you like stories? I do and I think so do most people. If I tell or read a story while preaching it is noticeable that the congregation perks up and listens!

Stories attract our attention even if we have heard them before. Stories make us think, use our imagination and broaden our horizons. Let me share a story with you now – it comes from a book called One hundred Wisdom Stories from around the World compiled by Margaret Silf. The story is called: **A Beautiful Friendship.**

There was once a beautiful lady who used to walk through the streets of the town where she lived, and everywhere she went she was noticed. Everyone in town wanted to talk to her, listen to her, ask her questions and spend time with her. In the same town, there was a poor girl, dressed in rags. She too was very beautiful, but no one ever noticed her or wanted to have anything to do with her. She was lonely and sad. She would gaze at the beautiful, finely dressed lady and see how much attention everyone paid to her. And she wished so much that people would pay attention to *her*. She had so much in her heart that she wanted to share, but no one would listen.

So one day, the poor little girl in rags plucked up courage to speak to the beautiful lady in fine clothes. *Please*, she said timidly, *excuse me, but may I ask you a favour?* the finely dressed lady, who was a very kind person, turned around at once and smiled at the poor girl. *Of course* she replied. *What can I do for you?*

Well, ventured the poor girl, *it's like this: you are very beautiful and finely dressed, and everyone takes notice of you, but I am poor and have no fine clothes, and no one ever even notices me. It would make me so happy if, just for one day, I might hide myself inside your beautiful cloak and walk with you through the town. Then whenever people stopped to notice you, they would also be paying attention to me, and I think I have something important to tell them that they would value, if only they knew.*

The fine, elegant lady readily agreed to the poor girl's request, so the very next morning, she wrapped her fine cloak around the poor girl, and they walked together through the town. Everywhere as usual, people stopped to admire the fine lady, and when they did so, they also paid attention to the poor girl wrapped in the fine lady's clothing. As they walked, the fine lady talked with the poor girl. She asked all about her, and was very interested in everything she had to say. She discovered just how wise the poor, ragged girl actually was, and they quickly became the best of friends – so much so that, after that day, they never wanted to be parted. To this day, they still walk through the world together.

And the name of the poor little girl in rags? She is called Truth. And her best friend in the beautiful clothes, whom everyone admires? Her name is Story.

God has given us a book full of stories

Stories which have truths wrapped up in them. I wonder how many sermons you remember for very long? However I am sure you remember some of the stories you have heard and many of the parables which Jesus told. Stories like the parables often need us to reflect upon them in order to extract the truths enfolded in them. When we read scripture on our own at home we may find Bible study notes helpful or if we read the Bible in a Study group discussing together helps each member grow in understanding and can give encouragement and inspiration for living out our faith day by day. In worship we have sermons to help us reflect on God's word from scripture and how we might respond to it.

Our God is a God who calls – as Deacon Kathy said last week. God calls and wants to send us out to share the good news of his love and forgiveness, not only to people like us but everyone even our enemies.

Let us think about the readings we heard earlier:

When God called Jonah and wanted to send him to Ninevah – what happened? Jonah ran away in the opposite direction.

When eventually Jonah went and gave God's message to the people of Ninevah then what happened? Not what Jonah expected - immediately everyone did as God asked, they repented and changed their ways.

What happened when Jesus called the fishermen Peter, Andrew, James and John and said he would make them fishers of people? They immediately did as he asked and left their nets, their boats and followed Jesus.

Are you like Jonah, the Ninevites or those first followers of Jesus?

Stories are remembered and hopefully the truths wrapped within them.

We heard in the reading from St Mark, Jesus saying: *The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe the good news.*

God has given us a book full of stories that hymn has these words in the last 2 verses:

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| <p>3. <i>There are stories for parents and children,
for the old who are ready to rest,
but for all who can read them or listen
the story of Jesus is best.</i></p> | <p>4. <i>For it tells how he came from the Father
his far-away children to call,
to bring the lost sheep to their Shepherd,
the most beautiful story of all.</i></p> |
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So today if you feel you are a far-away child of God take time to be still and silent and open to hear Jesus calling you with love, and may God's Spirit enable you to respond without delay.

Or if you already know the truth of the good news of Jesus as your Saviour may God's Spirit help you share it with someone else, perhaps through your own story of coming to faith and what it means for you or one of the stories in the book God has given us. Amen

Blessing: Storyteller God, weave our stories into your timeless story and give us courage to face the future with the assurance that underneath are your everlasting arms and that nothing can separate us from your love.

And now may the blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit remain with us and all whom we love, now and evermore. Amen