

Sermon: Advent 1: The Patriarchs

Have you ever noticed how we are all partial to a story? Whether it is in the form of a film or a novel or anecdotally rehearsed, we all share in stories. Quite often we can't get enough of stories, buying the latest best seller, going to see the latest block buster, or binging on box-sets simply because we love a good gripping story. Recently I have been gripped by the TV adaptation of *His Dark Materials*. Our love of stories probably developed as children when either our teacher would sit us in the reading corner and say "Are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin", or possibly when our parents would read to us at night or even make-up a story in the vain hope of getting us to go to sleep.

And it is not really surprising that we love stories as this is how humanity has passed on information, from generation to generation for centuries. Story telling is an essential part of human communication. It is an excellent way of conveying ideas and events since somehow as a medium it is in-built into how we are made. All of us – to a greater or lesser extent – can tell a story. Some of these stories might be elaborate make belief like the Poirot novels of Agatha Christie, whilst others might simply be a rehearsal of what we have done in our lives, or things that have happened to other people. But quite simply, we love to tell a story. And when we talk to people we often speak as if we are telling a story too – "I must just tell you this... or have you heard about so and so?"

But there is a difference between these types stories. One is pure fiction and the other is an historical account. Often however, when we hear someone say "I'm gonna tell you a story", we don't expect it to be true. Unless the story is prefaced with "this is true" we expect the story to either be an elaborate version of the truth or pure fiction. We have become cynical due to hearing elaborate versions of the truth or by not hearing the whole truth or by hearing fake news reported as truth. We have grown cynical, as we're not sure whether the person telling the story can be trusted? Otherwise, why do we say to children when we suspect they are not telling the truth "are you telling stories?" Stories have become synonymous with the untrue.

And this relates not only to our encounters with children and the people we meet in the streets and share our lives with, but with the way in which we approach the Bible and our faith. When we hear the preacher say "I'm gonna tell you a story" unconsciously we wonder how much of the story is based in fact and how much in fiction. When we hear passages of narrative read from the scriptures, again, we wonder about their accuracy too. We wonder about their credibility. Stories have become synonymous with the untrue. And so we have learnt to doubt and treat them as works of fiction.

And this in itself is not wrong, because if we did not doubt we would not question, thus stunting our growth both as individuals, and in our faith. We need to question. But there does come a time when we need to stop doubting, and look at the text once more and see the truth in the text.

All the texts we have in the Bible have been kept for a purpose, as indeed Paul points out in his letter to the Romans when he wrote “whatever was written in former days, was written for our instruction and for our hope”. Sometimes however, that purpose is jolly hard to find, but there will be a reason. Often when we look at many of the books in the Old Testament we struggle to see the point behind them, especially when the excerpt we hear read in Church seems to be either barbaric or completely antiquated. But there is a reason. And that reason is primarily to show the relationship that existed and continues to exist between God and humanity.

Today, on this first Sunday of Advent, we recall the Patriarchs and Matriarchs of our faith with God; the founders of the covenant with God and Israel – of which we are heirs – and their willingness to listen to the voice of God and create a holy nation. However in doing so we must refer back to the scriptures since the only information we have of them is what is written in narrative. Do we trust this narrative? Not entirely as it is a story which has been passed on by oral tradition for centuries. But just because it is a story, does not mean that it does not contain truth.

After all, our faith is based on the greatest story ever told. Of Jesus being born in very unusual circumstances. Of him being the Son of God. Of his teaching ministry and ultimately of his death at Calvary and victorious resurrection 3 days later. Our faith is based in story, but a story full of truth. A Story that is not only true but one which contains truth and insight concerning how we should live and be in relationship with the Father.

Story telling is a powerful way of conveying the truth. I’m reminded of this daily as my children watch fairy tales and fables on the box with their implicit messages of hope, love, and other values we cherish. Not all stories are untrue. Often our faith is derided by those who do not believe, as being an elaborate myth on stories that are a complete fabrication. But this is not the case. Our faith is based on a true story of God’s love and the extraordinary lengths God went to to be in relationship with us. As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ in slightly different ways to those we are used to this Christmas, perhaps we need re-examine our use of storytelling? Perhaps we need to get better at telling the story, or having confidence to tell the story? Perhaps we need to remember that this is just one part of the greatest story ever told?