

Sunday 3 September 2006: Twelfth Sunday after Trinity

Do not forget the things that your eyes have seen

Readings: Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

“But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children”

In a recent radio discussion I heard focussing on the teaching of history in schools, one of the chief concerns expressed was that while children often gained in-depth knowledge of the particular area or period that they were studying, they had no idea of how that fitted in with the grand sweep of history taken in a wider perspective. They, so the argument went, got no sense of narrative or story. So, for example, a group of primary school children who were learning about the Greek and Persian wars of around 500BC managed to include in their project a whole section about the Anglo-Persian oil company of 1950. After all, their internet search on Persia had brought it up as relevant! They seemed to have no idea about the 25 centuries difference in time frame.

Hearing that rather extreme example of historical confusion, brought to mind some of those old chestnuts that come from childrens' unwitting combination of various Bible stories and a smattering of history :

Noah's wife was called Joan of Ark. But she only answered to Jean because she could not speak English.

When Mary heard that she was the Mother of Jesus, she sang the Magna Carta. She sang Acapulco, because opera and instruments hadn't been invented yet.

And my own particular rather risqué favourite:

Lot's wife was a pillar of salt by day, but a ball of fire by night.

Having a sense of story or narrative is not just important for our understanding of history. It's also crucial to our understanding of ourselves as people of faith – as the people of God. The American theologian Stanley Hauerwas describes Christians as a “storied people” – arguing that we can only make sense of who we are in relation to God, in relation to one another and in our own self-understanding by a grasp of this narrative, this sense of story:

“There is no more fundamental way to talk about God than in a story”, writes Hauerwas. “The fact that we come to know God through the recounting of the story of Israel and the life of Jesus is decisive for our truthful understanding of the kind of God we worship as well as the world in which we exist. (That story) is a reality-making claim that the world and our existence in it are God's creations – our lives and, indeed, the existence of the universe are but contingent realities”.

You don't need to trawl through theological tomes to find the basis for Hauerwas' arguments. It's there before us in the words of scripture, in the story told in the Gospels and in the words of Moses that we heard from Deuteronomy:

“But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children”

Read the context of this section, and you'll find that Moses is recalling the people of Israel to faithfulness to God's words, command and laws. In the next chapter, he will remind them again of the laws that we know as the Ten Commandments. But step back and get the bigger picture, and

you'll find that laws and commandments are the framework, the language of a bigger story – but they are not the substance of that story. The real story is about the covenant relationship between God and his people – the real story is about God's continuing faithfulness to that relationship and the repeated cycle of failure, repentance and failure of the people in response. It's the story of God leading his people to freedom and redemption through the Red Sea. It's the story of the people struggling to respond to this freedom by faithfulness to the hope expressed by that redemption, but all too often being held captive by their failures not just in the keeping of the law but in keeping that hopeful story alive in their community. Not all of the books of the Hebrew scriptures are written as "story" – some seem to us catalogues of laws or commandments or descriptions of bizarre and sometimes savage rituals – but they can really only be understood as story. That's one reason why quoting passages of scripture out of context can be so dangerous – a "thou shalt not" in isolation can give a wholly distorted view of its meaning in context or lead to the sort of connections that end up with Mary singing Magan Carta!

It seems to me being held captive by the letter of the law, while failing to keep alive the hope expressed by the story of their redemption, is at the heart of the attitude of some of the Pharisees we heard about in Gospel reading today. Notwithstanding the unnamed clergyperson (not one of the team here) who claimed the day they purchased a dishwater to be the most important of their lives, it's hard to see where the washing of bronze kettles fits with the God of freedom, hope and justice that the great sweep of the Hebrew scriptures reveals.

"This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines."

Week by week and year by year, the liturgy of the church in which we participate keeps telling the story, keeps reminding us of the narrative of God with God's people of which we are part. It's no coincidence that at the two greatest festivals of the church's year, Easter and Christmas, our liturgy tells a story – the awe-inspiring Easter Vigil, unfolding this great story from creation to resurrection morning; the service of 9 Lessons and carols, and the lighting of the Advent candles, setting the birth of Christ, the coming of the light in the darkness within the whole sweep of promise and fulfilment that narrative reveals. It's no coincidence that at the heart of this central act of worship of the Christian church is a story, a narrative. Listen to the words of the Eucharistic prayer and you hear a story being told – a story of the redemption and freedom to which calls us and which God has granted us in Jesus Christ. And we even get a story within that bigger story – the narrative of the Last Supper, giving us the context of how that freedom has been won for us in the self-giving of Jesus Christ and our participation in his body and blood. The "Great Amen" – as it's called – at the end of that prayer is actually our "yes" to the promises of God – a yes that says that the story it tells of God and God's people is part of my story, our story.

"But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children"

I can't help thinking that some of the disputes within the Anglican communion today, are our modern-day equivalent of arguing over bronze kettles, while we shut our eyes and hearts and minds to that great narrative, that great story of redemption that binds us together as God's people. Endeavouring to ensure the purity of our outward appearance, while ignoring the big story, it's all too easy to forget who we are in relation to one another and in relation to God.

At the end of this service, we'll be telling a new chapter in the story of this particular Christian community, when we commission Susannah Woodd for her new work with USPG, the Anglican mission society. For the next 3 years, St. Luke's Hospital in Chilema -Zomba and the country of

Malawi will be part of Susannah's story, and she will be part of the story of that place and of the people there. But she, and by direct relationship, they too will also be very much part of our story here at St. Martin's. And we through our prayers and sharing of ourselves will be part of Susannah's story, our life as a community intertwined with the new communities where she will find herself living and working, worshipping and learning. Geographical and cultural distance cannot weaken a bond that is sealed by our "Amen" our "yes" to the great story of our redemption – to the promises that God still makes to his people, and which is ours in the sharing of bread and wine.

So today in this Eucharist, as we send Susannah out, as we reflect on the different stories already intertwined in this place today, and on the new stories that will be written and taken up into that grand narrative in the next few years, my prayer for Susannah and for us too echoes the words of Moses to God's people:

"But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life"