

14 June 2009

“Jackanory Jesus”.

Mark 4:26-34

A scorpion came to the bank of a river and could not cross because the river was in flood. Happily, the scorpion saw a fish, contentedly nibbling the weeds in the shallows of the river. “Please, fish”, said the scorpion, “let me climb onto your back, and carry me across the river”. The fish was quick to reply. “Never”, he said, “for if I carry you on my back, you will sting me and I shall die.”

But the scorpion had a ready and persuasive answer. “Not so. If I sting you and you die in the middle of the river, I too will die because I cannot swim. I shall surely drown”.

The fish was reassured, took the scorpion onto his back, and began to swim across the flooded river. Half way over, the scorpion gripped the fish, and stung him. With his dying breath, the fish asked plaintively, “Why did you do it? Now we shall both die.”

Replied the scorpion, “I wish I knew, little friend. I wish I knew. It’s just the way I am”.

When I was a small child, one of the highlights of my day was, after lunch, to sit by the radio (although I think we called it a “wireless” in those days) and to, quite literally, “Listen with Mother”. Mind you, we never called the programme by its proper name: it was always called the “ding-de-dongs” after the chimes which started the programme. I am sure that many of you listened to the programme with your own children, and you will know that it included nursery rhymes and songs and always finished with a story. I enjoyed it; although I think it would be considered insufferably twee and middle-class today. When television came along, I never found the story-telling of “Jackanory” anything like as engaging – but I was probably too old for it by then. I much preferred “Huckleberry Hound”, “Yogi Bear” and even “Ivor the Engine” (you might have guessed that last one)!

But people still love stories today. “Woman’s Hour” always used to conclude with a story and some people might think that it is a shame that it has been replaced by a drama; but what is that if not a story acted out? Many children still go to sleep with a story read by mum or dad, and adults can continue that by tuning in to “A Book at Bedtime” if they want to. Many comedians – think of Jasper Carrott or Billy Connolly – have a wonderful way with the most bizarre yet convincing stories. And in recent years, proper story-telling has come back into vogue, whether that be in schools and libraries or at literary and arts festivals. (Of course, in many places, it has never gone away: whether in the cafes of Turkey and Iran, or gathered round the fire in West Africa, people love to listen to well-known stories). There is a Scottish Story-telling Centre in Edinburgh’s Royal Mile. Even my wife’s primary school has a story-teller’s chair in its playground.

We all know how easy it is to ruin a good story by telling it badly. I once knew a nine-year old boy who could any tale he told by constantly asking dad whether he had got the details right. That totally disturbed the flow. But, in the hands of a master story-teller who draws us into the narrative with the eloquence of his diction and the drama of his words, we are transported into another world. Our minds are totally engaged, we hang on to every word that is said, we sympathise with each character in the plot, we visualise every new situation in our mind’s eye. It is often said that “the pictures are better on radio” than on television – well, they are better in well-told stories as well, as one can allow one’s imagination to run riot.

We all know that one of Jesus’ great gifts was his ability to tell a good story. He used everyday things and situations to weave into stories which helped people to learn about God and his Kingdom. Jesus’ stories would often take people by surprise, puzzle them, amuse them, even unsettle them, but they always went away with something to think about. And, from Sunday School days onwards, we teach and

learn these stories. Some of them are long and detailed, like the Prodigal Son or the Good Samaritan. Some are controversial or end in a surprising way, like the stories of the Unjust Judge or the landowner who paid everyone the same for differing amounts of work, or the poor and marginalised people who were dragged off the country lanes to eat at the king's banqueting table. Some are homely, like the woman who cleans her house from top to bottom to retrieve the coin she has lost. Some are just tiny sketches – which isn't to say that they weren't longer in the actual telling. And most of them are still memorable, two millennia after they were first spoken.

There are a couple of things that I do need to say about Jesus' stories. The first is to say how annoyed I sometimes get when people who point up some of the supposed inconsistencies in the Gospel accounts by saying that "in St. Mark's Gospel Jesus told this story to a crowd in Capernaum, but in St. Luke's Gospel he told it to his disciples in Jerusalem", or that "the story in St. Matthew's Gospel says that there were ten reapers in the field but in St. John's it says there were fifty" – you will realise that these are imaginary examples. I think that their arguments are specious, because I am absolutely convinced that Jesus used the same parables and stories more than once, in different places and to different people. Furthermore, while retaining the basic form of the story, he may well have altered some of the peripheral details to suit each local situation – why ever not?

For doing this would have saved Jesus time in constantly thinking up new material (after all, he didn't have a team of script-writers behind him); it would have emphasised the message to those, like the disciples, who heard the stories more than once; and it ensured that the stories later got set down accurately on paper for us to read today. If it doesn't sound blasphemous, one can imagine Jesus telling - but then dropping - some parables that didn't make the point clearly enough or which simply failed to engage his audience; those are the ones that never made it onto the pages of the New Testament. What we've got today must be the stories that worked!

The other important thing that I want to say here is this: when we look at the parables, we mustn't make the mistake of going into too much detail. Every parable is told to make one, or just possibly two, main points. But, from the Middle Ages onwards, preachers and writers have laboured over every trivial detail of the stories, saying, "This means that" and extracting meanings which, I am absolutely sure, Jesus never intended. For instance, in the parable of the vineyard we are told that the owner built a watchtower, dug a ditch and build a fence around his vines. Even though I genuinely believe that the words of the Bible are important, I really don't think those little touches are anything more than scene-setting intended to make the story more credible. I certainly don't want to start finding deep hidden significance in them, for that would actually obscure the real teaching that Jesus was trying to give. The trick, of course, lies in knowing just which bits of the story are crucial and which are not!

It may surprise you to know that parables did not originate with Jesus. Far from it: there are a number of examples in the Old Testament, such as the story of the poor man's lamb which Nathan the prophet used to shame David after his affair with Bathsheba, or the less familiar parables of four trees in Judges 9 or of two eagles and the vine in Ezekiel 17. But, apart from following a well-trodden path, why did Jesus make such use of parables to teach spiritual truths? I think there are a number of reasons. They were clearly true to life, which meant that people related to them without any difficulty. They also turned their hearers from spectators into participants, taking them out of their comfort zones and making them think. To the ordinary people, used to the rabbis' dusty academic debates, Jesus' teaching method must have come as a breath of fresh air.

But there is one huge difficulty with Jesus' parables, which he himself mentions in the passage we read earlier. We often think that Jesus used parables to make things clear to simple people; but, on his own admission, the opposite is in fact true. The parable appear not to clarify but mystify, not to include but exclude. In v.10-12 Jesus almost seems to be implying that he uses parables to sift out the people who have spiritual understanding from the dull-witted – keen students of church history might want to ask if this is almost a form of gnosticism, of certain people being given a secret code or key to gain access to God? In the Gospel of Mark, notorious for Jesus trying to conceal rather than reveal who he is, this seems a very credible view to hold. But it is one which I can't accept; I think that something else is going on instead.

I think the key here lies in the fact that most of the parables do not come with a built-in explanation: did you notice how I deliberately didn't tell you what the story of the scorpion and the fish might mean? (I think it's a story about sin and human nature – but you may think otherwise). So Jesus' stories they are not like those children's stories or object lessons where the teacher says, "Now, boys and girls, what this story tells us is ..." and where the children all switch off simultaneously! Instead, by leaving his stories open-ended, Jesus is inviting his listeners to think through what they have heard, to ask questions and come to their own deeply-felt conclusions and convictions. He was perhaps not so interested in those who would make a snap decision to follow him after faith had been served up on a plate. And he knew that many of the people who would recognise were not the religious leaders of the day, with their carefully worked-out theology, but ordinary people who might be more open-minded.

Well, all the teaching of Jesus was done 2000 years ago. So, one has to ask, does the story format have any relevance today? Although, I have to say, it isn't one I often use, I have to say that the answer must be "yes". Over the last 25 years or so there have been many people, mostly but not exclusively American, who have been questioning whether the traditional kind of sermon you've heard tonight is the best kind to use today, or whether folk who live in a society where deductive reasoning is not something they do very often should be presented with Christian truth in more of a narrative format. It seems that the way people think is actually changing, and that they do not want to listen to sustained intellectual arguments but stories which hopefully will tell them of God.

Certainly many people have said how stories draw them in and keep them listening (after all, everyone wants to know what happens at the end). More important, many like the way that they have to interact with the story, drawing out its morals and relevance for themselves rather than being told what to think. The rise of Celtic spirituality, too, based in such places as the Iona and Northumbria Communities, has encouraged the rediscovery of story-telling in a Christian context. After all (as any preacher knows), people often go home from worship remembering the illustrations - or stories - in a sermon, rather than the points they're meant to illustrate!

Does this mean that all of our sermonising ought to be story-telling? No, it doesn't; I don't think you can elucidate Paul's finer points of theology from stories (although I think you could easily construct imaginary stories of church life to introduce the very human problems he was trying to solve in his letters to the Corinthians!) But I do think it means that people like me have to get better at telling stories as we communicate Christian truth, especially when we are speaking to people who have little knowledge of the Christian faith. It means that those who read the Bible in church need to read the stories of what happened as stories and not as if they are reading the telephone directory. For what is the Bible if not the story of God interacting with human beings?

As Christians, we have a wonderful story to tell. Sometimes we just need to tell it, with enthusiasm and clarity. At other times, following the example of Jesus, we have to break down its abstract meaning and turn it into parables in order to engage with people and make our points. And, above all, we need to know and tell our own stories of faith to those we meet and who become interested in our faith. No-one can ever gainsay personal experience; which means that our own story can be the most vital and vivid of all. Our stories are the stories of God's life.