

Sermon – Sunday 9th February 2020 – 6 pm

I'm fascinated by stories. The stories we tell and the way we tell stories. When I was with my brother over Christmas, he rather cynically spoke about controlling the narrative within family life. What his comment recognises – perhaps in a negative way - is the power within stories. The way that we shape stories and are shaped by them.

One of my roles within the Diocese is as a Local Vocations Adviser. I listen to people who are exploring their vocation and help them to consider what next. It's a role that is all about stories. The stories of God's call on each of our lives and the way we recognise that call. I love the variety of ways in which people tell their story. The language that they choose. The shape of the story. I also love the way that for each of us the story of our lives is always taking shape. The emphasis might change over time. Key moments may remain key – or they may not. The focus might shift over time. Interpretations may grow, or they might remain fixed.

This evening's New Testament epistle is a way of telling the story of faith. The letter to the Ephesians begins with three chapters setting out the author's theology, and the next three chapters discuss how this is put into practice. A number of different images are used to tell the story. To help the reader to understand what is required of a life of faith; a life of discipleship. First the writer sets up two opposites. Those who follow Christ are pitted against gentiles. The latter are derided. We are told what it means to be a Christian because it is the opposite of the way the gentiles live.

I wonder how often we tell our own stories like this. Whether it can be easy to find our own identity by recognising what we are not. To discover where we fit because we can see where we don't fit. And I wonder whether that is a helpful part of our stories.

Another image that is used is that of putting on new clothing. This image suggests a kind of conversion, akin to changing aspects of our identity and inhabiting a new way of life. Can you identify with this image? Do you recognise it as part of your own experience? Or is it helpful in guiding you in your life?

There is something so important about how we tell our stories – and indeed whether we tell them. I wonder how often you have the opportunity to speak about your faith. To look back on your life and try to make sense of where God has been at work. I wonder when you last told your story and I wonder how it has changed over time.

It strikes me that it helps us to tell our stories. And it also helps us to listen to the stories of others. To identify with their similar experiences as well as the differences. To allow our own story to take shape in relation to others.

Sometimes I can relate to some of the vocational stories I hear while I find others quite alien. Just as sometimes when I read the scriptures, I feel like they're speaking directly to me and at other times I can feel completely at sea. And the same can be said when I listen to some of the pronouncements of the Church of England. While I warm to some, there are others to which I want to say: "not in my name."

Yet I continue to believe in the importance of stories. Of telling our own and hearing others. Because we are all part of the Body of Christ and we are all part of a story that is bigger than our own.

Sometimes it's easy to see the connections, and sometimes it really isn't. But by continuing to tell our stories and to listen to others we are seeking to find the connections. And keeping the conversation going matters: because while the conversation remains open, maintaining mutual love and respect, there is the chance that we will all grow closer to God.

Amen