

Sunday 17/11/2019 Pastorate Service @ Christ Church, Leatherhead.

So What's the Story?

John 9:1-12 & 24-25

Intro:

Johnny came home from Sunday School and his Mum asked what he had learned about in Sunday School that day. Johnny paused for a moment and then said: 'We heard about how Moses helped the Israelites escape from captivity in Egypt. They were getting away and the Egyptians were chasing them when they came to the Red Sea. Suddenly they were in a jam and yelling at Moses to come up with a plan. Moses quickly called up the Engineering Corps and they brought out a pontoon bridge which they laid across the Red Sea and all the Israelites ran across. The Engineers brought up the rear and laid charges on the bridge as they came across and they waited for the Egyptians to come. As they were halfway across, kabluie – they blew the whole lot to smithereens and the Egyptians drowned in the Red Sea.' Johnny's Mum paused for a moment and then asked: 'Was that really the story your teacher told you?' Johnny thought about it for a moment and then he said: 'Mum, if I told you the story she told us, you'd never believe me!'

Our theme today is the Presidential Theme for the Connexional Year – So What's the Story? Want to make 2019-20 the year of Story Telling, or Testimonies, in the Methodist Church of Great Britain. So, what's it about?

Essentially it is about trying to recapture the truth that evangelism, yes, that rather big important word, is the responsibility of EVERYONE!! I don't believe the church is in decline because we don't have enough Evangelists (with a capital E)! Rather, it is in decline because we have forgotten to play our part in telling The Story. After all, that's what evangelism basically is – to tell good news, to tell the story!

1. Everyone has a story to tell – in fact, more than one!

When I came back from our ministerial synod in March, I presented a paper to our leadership team at LRMC Trey Hall, the new Connexional Director of Evangelism and Growth, had presented to the synod. It's entitled How to develop a culture of lay testimony in your congregation. You know their biggest bugbear with it was? Yep, you guessed it – the word Testimony!! (Oh, you didn't guess that?!?) Somehow, we have managed to turn one of the most vital, powerful tools for evangelism into a dirty word. How did we manage that? We've managed to concoct this image of 'Testimony' that equates it with a Pauline Damascus Road experience rendering anything other than a blinding flash of divine intervention and radical transformation absolutely useless. Rubbish!! Nothing could be further from the truth. Story is story and no one story is 'better' than any other. Each story has its own source of significance and speaks into a multitude of different moments, most of which we could never know until we've told the story! Think about it, how often has your journey with Jesus been radically transformed by the uber testimony and how often has it but fundamentally changed by the quiet sharing of the person sitting next to you? For the most part we often struggle to relate to the person standing up and telling us how desperate their lives were before and then God broke in in a blinding flash of light and now they're never the same again. Good story but does that connect significantly with my story, which is about a quiet life lived under the radar making sure everything is in order doing all the good I can wherever I can to whomever I can? I doubt it. It's going to take a different kind of story to break into my experience, isn't it? So, whose got that story and why aren't you telling it me?! We need to hear the stories of how God helped make sense of the mundane things in my life, how God helped in that time of deep sorrow, how he iced the cake of my great joy, how God walks with me in the daily round. Does that mean that there is a story for every minute of every day – no, I don't think so, but there is definitely more material there than we give credit for. Stop, look, listen and you will see how God is moving in your life and helping to shape your story of grace and love and life and as you do, don't be afraid to share it!

In the summer we had a House-group Sunday at LRMC and asked some people to share what their House-group meant to them. One of those was someone who, six months previous had, quite unexpectedly, lost

their husband. Here she was, standing in front of the congregation sharing how God was shaping her story anew through these precious friends in her group. Amazing, powerful stuff. A story worth telling.

2. It's not about what you don't know – it's about what you do know!

So often when we are confronted with sharing our stories, our testimonies, we become concerned about setting ourselves up afterwards for being confronted with questions about things we don't have the answers to. In fact, it's like standing up here preaching to you. I don't know everything about everything. I know a few things about some things. So often we get ourselves into a knot, we don't want to put our heads up above the parapet because we can think of all the big questions that become the deflecting mechanism to excuse us from standing up and saying what we do know. Just think about the story we read from the Bible this morning. Here's someone born blind. Never known anything else. There's an interesting conversation at the beginning of the passage. The disciples want to know why is he blind? Did someone do something wrong? You know, one of those questions we struggle to answer. Jesus simply says it's about God's glory.

We see that same inappropriate line of questioning working itself out in the middle bit of the story, which we didn't read. The religious leaders interrogate the man about how he has come to see. He simply says: 'I don't know anything about who or how.' When he is questioned the second time, he again says, 'Whether this bloke is a sinner or not, I don't know.' I think he probably added the words '...and I don't care! I was blind and now I see!' isn't that what happens? I don't know how this thing called grace works because, when I think I've got it all worked out, I discover that no I don't and God surprises me in a way that I didn't expect. Do I know how God heals? No, I don't. I know that he does. I know sometimes he doesn't and then I've got to think about things a little bit longer, hold things a little bit tighter, live with questions a little bit deeper. I do know that as I undertake to do those things, the things I become certain of I become much more certain of, and there are not too many of those things. In fact, there don't need to be too many of those things. Karl Barth, a German Theologian who gets inflicted upon students when they study theology, wrote a massive theological tome. He was asked towards the end of his life, after all that he had written. What did you learn? What can you tell us? He stood up and said the following: 'Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.' What more do we really need to know? My need to tell about all kinds of complex theology and doctrines. About whether the rapture is pre or post millennial all fades away against the fundamental story about God's love for each and every one of us and how we are recipients of that love. That's the story, that's what we need know, that's what we're called to tell. The other stuff, if it's that important, well, you can work it out, look it up, study it and explore it and find out that there is a whole range of confusion on most them anyway! Follow the love and that leads you to the truth because the final thing I want say this morning is:

3. Be ready to reap the joy telling your story will bring

Jerry Cook & Stanley Baldwin co-authored a book, Love, Acceptance & Forgiveness some time back now. In that book they were keen to enable people to engage with the essential story of how God's love transforms our lives. They were trying to get their church members to become better evangelists, story tellers, if you like. To give them the tools they would need to do so. One of Jerry's church members took up the challenge and had begun befriending her neighbour and taking opportunities to share her story with them. One day, while Jerry was in his office, the phone rang. It was this member whose story had so impacted the life of her neighbour that she wanted to make a commitment to Jesus, but the church member panicked and didn't know what to do so she called Jerry to come and help. He jumped into his car and as he was dashing across town to go and pray with them, he heard God ask him: 'Just where do you think you're going?' He was a bit taken aback and responded to pray with Sue and her friend. 'No, you're not' said God. 'I gave her to Sue to bring into a new relationship with me, you but out!' So, he turned around and headed back to the office and called Sue and said he wasn't coming but that she had this! He gave her some reassurance and prayed with her on the phone and then left her to get on with it.

About half an hour later the aura of joy that burst into his office as the two of them came to share the news of what had happened was overwhelmingly powerful. It wasn't just the new convert who was overflowing with joy but Sue as well. She had also discovered that this is what it's all about.

Conclusion:

Johnny had a story to tell but he didn't trust the one he had heard so he came up with a different, more plausible one, or so he thought. It's not about the story we have heard – it's about the story we're involved in, the one we are living. Yes, it might be messy and incomplete. We might not have all the answers – in fact, we probably never will – but what we do have is what we have experienced of God's love and grace touching and changing our hearts and lives so let's join with the blind man in John's Gospel and say: "Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!"

Amen