

How do we describe who we are? I had lunch with a friend this week and we were reflecting on the many issues which face us as a nation, and as the church at present. The ongoing pandemic, the social and political inequality that has been made clearer in the face of this, systematic changes which are required in how we deal with each other in the world, so that all are fairly included. To be honest, half way through lunch I lost my appetite, there is so much to face and no easy answers.

But as we were reflected we also talked about the role of the church and the role of faith in this conversation. Which lead to a discussion about where our hope comes from in such times; and then how we tell the story of such hopes. How we describe our lives is an interesting gift. How we tell the story of our week, or how we reflect on our experiences and pain we encounter. How we record why we are the people we have become. I have been reading this week a novel by Tove Jansson called *The Summer Book*. In it one of the characters reflects - *"Sometimes people never saw things clearly until it was too late and they no longer had the strength to start again. Or else they forgot their idea along the way and didn't even realize that they had forgotten"*

Sometimes the story we tell of the choices we make or our actions reflect not where we started or even our intention; rather they reflect where we find ourselves in that moment. And often in our telling we fail to notice where God is at work, or even question where God is in the story of our lives.

Today in our scripture readings invite us to consider the consequences of the stories that we tell – and God's role in them. A poetic account in Isaiah of many visions coming together, Paul reminding the Romans of what it means to be followers of God; as well as how the disciples were coming to understand who Jesus is.

The first section we hear from Romans today in essence is a summary of all we have heard over recent weeks from the proceeding chapters. Paul is writing an apologetic – that is a defence for what he sees - as the presence, work, and callings of God on the entire human family. Readers are called to live a countercultural lifestyle, moving from the life of flesh to a life formed by the Holy Spirit. Because he is writing to those under the Roman Empire, Paul persuades Christian communities living in the imperial centre to live not according to the political ideologies of Rome, but rather to live out faith on the basis of what God did in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ¹.

The stories Paul shares then reflect this imperative – they are seeking to challenge the status quo which sees some as property and others as outsiders. While some of Paul's writing may be challenging for us, his heart and his storytelling are in the right place. He wants this new community to live differently, to not assume that the way that it has always been is the way that it should be now. It is one of the reasons

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4563

that the sentence ‘when we return to normal’ is a dangerous one. What power imbalances does the ‘normal’ promote – and where is God in the story of normal.

When we tell our stories, when we share our lives – do we look for the signs of God’s action – do we remember to consider where God is at work in our collective experiences? We come to understand who we are, and who God is by in many ways, but one way is to take the time to consider where God has been at work this week – in our life’s journey and in the journeys of those around us. Maybe noticing where God is, helps us also work out where we should be.

We see a glimpse of this in our Gospel reading and the interactions between Jesus and Peter as Jesus identity is confirmed by the disciples. This reading is so often used to help us talk about identity, not only of Jesus and God, but of Peter and ourselves. But in showing us something of this identity we also get a glimpse of the hopes which make up this identity.

Jesus’ identity is composed in the context of God’s interaction with Israel. When Peter declares Jesus to be the Messiah he has images of political independence for his people. Behind Peter’s hopes is a political expectation that Rome would no longer wield its swords, that Rome would hand back authority to the one true power of the universe². And when Jesus starts preaching about a kingdom of heaven which keys he has given to the faithful, you can only imagine the excitement these disciples would have felt, an excitement Jesus will reshape and redirect next week.

When we consider Jesus identity, I wonder what hopes we attach to it. Do we, like Peter attach an expectation that God will bring us to political justice and power?

Do we even take time to consider where God is in our context, in our expectations – and what do we then do when our expectations are not met?

But let’s take a step back...one of the key parts of this gospel passage is the fact that Peter has courage, at this point in time, to name Jesus as the Messiah, and not be afraid of it. In time he will go on to completely misunderstand what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah, he will later resist Jesus’ intention to turn himself over the authorities, and he will eventually deny and dissent him. But for now... for now, in just this moment, he confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. And that’s something for which to give thanks and not to just dismiss because we know how the story ends.

It is also a lesson for us too! We could jump ahead to all the things we miss, to all that we hope for, for all that we wish God would fix. Or like Peter, we could focus on the moment in front of us – and seize it by the hand.

This is not to overlook all that still needs to be done, the important issues that surround us and even overwhelm us at times. But it is to claim that God is at work in

² <http://www.davidlose.net/2020/08/pentecost-12-a-not-by-flesh-and-blood/>

our communities and in each of our lives. Like Peter in this moment – part of our story needs to be the times that we recognise who God is, and where God is. But in doing this, we need to remember this is not the end, it is just part of the journey we are on.

At another moment in Tove Jansson's³ book the character reflects - "*The thing about God, she thought, is that He usually does help, but not until you've made an effort on your own.*" I was struck by this quote considering our readings for today. Is it about effort or is it about awareness or it about being open to what God is doing, rather than trying to control how the story ends. Peter and Paul have slightly different approaches to this.

I think this is a powerful message to both our communities too. Both Christ Church and St Anne's face changes in the coming months. We will each be invited to consider what God is calling us to in our respective places. For Christ Church you have a new priest who will invite to share a new journey together; for St Anne's we return to our building next week as one congregation and we will need to listen for what story God is calling us to now.

Like the communities Paul was writing too we need to be open to new ways living; not just repeating the patterns of the past, and being open to the injustices God wants us to challenges – and as the Roman's found – they may not be the challenges we expected.

Similarly, like Peter we may well be able to name clearly who Jesus was, and what power that brings for change – but we may need to understand who God is in a new way – and maybe the changes are not the ones we hoped for, but something that even makes us uncomfortable – as Peter found in the weeks ahead.

Regardless of what we face however we can be reassured that God is at work in our lives and in our communities this week.⁴ And maybe as we share the stories of our week, or even of our holidays we can take time too, to share where we saw and experienced God in our stories too.

The power of Peter's confession is that in this moment it gave strength and courage to the community. A courage that empowered them in the weeks that were to follow. Our stories should also do the same, as we face whatever the week holds for us, as we remember where God has already journeyed with us. Amen.

³ Tove Jansson, *The Summer Book* - Published May 29th 2003 by Sort of Books

⁴ <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/08/pentecost-12-a-pausing-to-give-thanks/>