

Lent 4

We all know the structure of a ripping yarn; a good story we might love. There is a tortuous plot development leading to the climax: the answer is given - she actually will marry him despite everything; or is victory finally won; or 'who dunnit' is revealed. And the story then very rapidly falls away to they lived happily ever after, or Fred went on to have a successful career in accountancy, or the murderer got their comeuppance.

The biblical narrative is built around essentially the same structure. There are great issues for the Hebrew people being slaves in Egypt. Through many twists and turns, they end up with the climax recorded in today's Old Testament reading – they finally come to live in the Promised Land. The promise of salvation comes to pass. The Children of Israel now have a home. And the story of Jesus can be viewed similarly. Set in the broad sweep of Jewish history, the short life of a wandering sage who advocated a new way of living, in a climatic ending, is killed. Then with a twist, this was not seen to be the tragic end of the story – there still was yet Easter day. . . . the new climax of the Christian story!

And even the stories of Jesus, like the famous one we have heard today, have a similar structure. Here there is the plot development around a young man wanting to test his freedom and discover the world – but in the end is unable to survive. The climax comes when he decides to return home and is surprisingly welcomed – and which is also surprising for this young man's older brother who had soberly remained at home the whole time. But, the father proclaims: 'the person who once was dead is now alive, the lost has been found.' There is great rejoicing – or if you are the older brother (and many of us are probably are) - there is bitterness and resentment over such an outpouring of joy and celebration.

But what happens in this story the next day, or in two weeks time? How is the younger brother then treated? Does the older brother get on with life, or perhaps does he carry resentment and bitterness in his heart? Is the relationship between the two brothers restored? And what happens to the Children of Israel now they have the Promised Land? And what happens not to Jesus, but the story about Jesus, now that the climax has come to pass? Do we just wait for a re-run of his story and his return – or is there something that should be happening now?

News is only news when there is a crisis say Brexit, or there is a resolution of that crisis. In our own lives it is how the crises or big issues play out that will determine who we are, and set the background to our identity: an illness, a death or a birth, a marriage a divorce, a new job whatever. However, and this is the question for today, **how do we live in the ordinariness of life beyond the climax of our story?** Is there actually still a goal and purpose strong enough to draw us forward – like a Promised Land out there? When the celebrations for the prodigal soon fade – what keeps people going? How long does the joyous homecoming continue to sustain the reality of farm life again?

I think the few verses from the book of Joshua we read are helpful and instructive.

The reading, in a very understated way, simply records that the Israelites, after wandering in the wilderness for 40 years since their amazing escape from slavery in Egypt, finally make it to the Promised Land. The point of their journeying has come to pass – they have just crossed the Jordan and they celebrate in their new land, this much promised land, their first Passover. After all that they

have endured, all of sudden they were there! Of course, with hindsight, we know it turned out to be far more complicated: other people were living there; establishing life in this land took generations. However, at that moment in Gilgal – they were there! They were in the Promised Land.

So in the story what happens?

They celebrate the Passover – it was again the date to do this. This Passover would have been a fitting, emotionally charged celebration. They would have recalled the freedom that God had won for them, in leaving Egypt – they were free – free at last. But it, at least as recorded in Joshua, this was not an exuberant occasion. There is just one verse:

“While the Israelites were camped in Gilgal they kept the Passover in the evening on the fourteenth day of the month in the plains of Jericho.” (Joshua 5:10)

And that is it. One can almost sense a foreboding here – the goal has been reached, but somehow, we now have to make sense of this new life we have been given. Freedom, salvation and the promises offered have been fulfilled, but how will they now live life? This sombre, flat, perhaps ordinary story of life must now continue. So the day after the Passover, they ate their first meal derived from their new land. “On that very day they ate the produce of the land”. Then there comes this fascinating detail:

“The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land.” (12)

You will recall that in the great saga of escape from Egypt, the Israelites had no food. Yahweh provided food – some sticky substance that was found each morning on the desert floor. By eating this they survived their wanderings towards their Promised Land. However, now, having passed the climax of the story into the ordinariness of life, **the manna ceases**; and also the quails no longer come. We too can reach that destination or goal, or event or celebration, and **the manna ceases**. To that point you realise you have been carried along in the knowledge of the presence of God as you quest for your goal – and then **the manna ceases**. For the prodigal son, what happens next? **The manna also ceases**.

Our readings for today do have some clues.

In the first part of Joshua 5 we have the Adults Only section of the chapter, which our lectionary has spared us. There was a mass circumcision. Yes that is right, we are told that many flint knives are made, and all the males were circumcised. Perhaps this could explain why there were subdued celebrations! Circumcision is a ritual, a rite of identity of being a Jew; an outward sign of being a child of God – for males. This custom and ritual was not practiced while the Israelites were fleeing Egypt and seeking the Promised Land. As Joshua says “the males had not been circumcised on the way”.(7) The point is, once the manna ceases, ritual and custom resume. Life, which according to Joshua settles down very quickly to just a normal routine – “they ate the crops of the land Canaan that year” – is punctuated with reminders, rituals and practices which re-present the great events and realities of their life: like circumcision, like the celebration of the Passover and the sabbath observance. Ritual becomes important.

Our ordinary lives can be sustained by ritual. So in the midst of the ordinary, but relaxed and comfortable lives of Australians, ritual helps. Is this why some of our public holidays like Anzac day

are getting bigger and bigger? Or with Australia Day – getting more and more controversial. We crave ritual and an identity reflected in that ritual. In fact in a recent article I read, the idea was put forward that the great upswing in the use of social media – the Facebooks and Twitters of the world – is actually now providing a ritual for life. We do not really need to know what a celebrity, or the young lass down the street, had for breakfast, but we do need to just check and have that “ritual” of being up to date. James Smith, the author of this article suggests

“Twitter and Facebook are not just “media” that are neutral, benign conduits of information and communication: they are world-making and identity-constituting. They invite and demand modes of interaction that function as liturgies. Like so many formative liturgies, they extort the essential by the seemingly insignificant, precisely by telling us a story, capturing our imaginations to perceive the world in ways we aren’t even aware of. We imagine more than we know.” (Christian Century 6 March 103, p. 33)

Soberly think of our Christchurch terrorist in this regard. Identity for him was formed through his use, ritual use, of social media. Social media typically is all about me and my standing and how I am to be perceived by my peers. Christian liturgy, with imagination, however, is not about ourselves, but calls us out of ourselves and into God. Either way, ritual helps us and sustains our ordinary lives.

But there is more to ordinary life than just ritual – or good Christian faith kind of ritual. This is where our other reading from 2 Corinthians may be helpful. Paul, in our passage begins by focusing back on that moment in time: the time of Jesus – that climax of the story – his death and resurrection. And as Paul says: “even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way.” (2 Cor 5: 16) Although we are not people who personally knew Jesus, nor were we there at the cross or tomb or Jerusalem for Pentecost or whatever, there is still that sense – that moment in time when we “were in Christ” AND “there was a new creation: everything old passed away, and everything became new.” A time of insight, conversion if you like. But again how does that moment of conversion continue into the ordinariness of life?

Paul in this passage suggests that because “God reconciled us to God’s own self through Christ” he has given to us the ministry of reconciliation (18.) And he goes on and says “we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us.” So here is a remarkable feature of Christianity and sometimes, perhaps often, it gets us into trouble. Our faith is not just one in which there is a quiet reflection; and a certain ritual – Sunday by Sunday. Christianity has an activist element. We can call it evangelism, or we could equally call it Christian service. We are always called to live out our faith. Certainly, when the manna ceases, when the spiritual high passes – we are called on to share our faith, to serve others, and have this ministry of reconciliation, be ambassadors for Christ.

So when the manna ceases, how do we live life?

A simple answer: appreciate the quiet rituals of our living and our faith; and look outwards in love, in service and sharing the good news. Then the ordinariness of life may not be so ordinary.