

Share the Gospel: tell the story, and live it

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Pentecost + 10 – 2 Sam 11 26-12 13a, Ps 78 22-28, Eph 4 1-16, Jn 6 24-35

Our Zoom study group often worries about how our Sunday Bible readings are going to come across. These stories are often about violent and abusive behaviour and strange supernatural experiences. What effect are they going to have on a 21st century Christian community – not to mention our visitors? It sometimes feels as if we Zoom in each Tuesday evening to discuss what sort of hand the lectionary's dealt us this week, and what on earth we're going to do with it. We have great fun!

I think we generally agree that the world needs these stories. They often tell us what God thinks about a self-satisfied, inward-looking society focused on national self-interest, where individuals focus on immediate gratification. It's quite contemporary really; like the evening news. But where's the Good News in it?

There was plenty last week. At the feeding of the 5,000, that Jesus dished out food to just such people: no means tests; no questions about whether they deserved it or not. He just gave everyone what met their needs. That's pretty astonishing. But in today's Gospel – even more astonishing – he tells them the bread he gave them is actually his own self; *I am the bread of life*. And in communion today he'll do it with us; we're going to eat *the bread of life*. His life is part of us; and it can either give us the strength to do his work for which it was intended, or people can ignore the grace and use the energy for ourselves, or just sleep through its effects.

And that's what seems to happen to the Gospel now in prosperous, self-satisfied communities. It seems almost to be received as a right rather than a grace. And because it's been received as some sort of a right, it's treated as our property, and not to be shared. ... Is this what some people mean when they say that their religion is a private matter? Not that it's too personal to talk about, but that it's a commodity, like everything else our society tells us to hoard and insure? Does saying it's private keep it from anyone who'd come to enjoy it with us.

This seems more and more contemporary to me.

The Gospel is given to be shared, just like everything else is on this Earth. That's not in question. The *question* is *how* do we share it? And by this, I mean something quite different from acting on the Gospel. Acting on the Gospel is a wonderful and necessary thing. It means living compassionately and justly; loving our neighbours as ourselves. Acting on the Gospel is living a life which opens ourselves generously to a world that is desperately in need of grace. And that's a wonderful way to live: yet even that's not everything.

Sharing the Gospel is more than that. It's always meant *telling the story*; telling it to someone who doesn't know it; or who needs to hear it afresh. Just as we tell our children the stories that we grew up with – nourish our children with the food that we were nourished with – we are to tell people – tell all God's children the Gospel; tell them the Gospel which has given us our life in Christ. We are to share with them the bread of life as we have known it – in the living Christ we meet in the Gospel stories: the living Christ we meet in the broken bread and wine poured out.

The simplest way for us to share the stories is to read the Bible together with others in church and in home groups – like our Zoom group. If we're not in a home group or a group that meets in a pub or café or a park – a group who reads the

Gospel together – it's probably time we were. A group is less threatening than a church. A small group is somewhere to put the Gospel stories next to our stories, and push back and wrestle with them. And our gatherings can't be exclusive; they must be deliberately inclusive – always open to new people – new insights.

We may think that's not our style, but Jesus calls us to change our style. Jesus gave up everything to offer people what we need. We keep hearing that hiding away safely with a close circle of friends was one of the very things he sacrificed. Doing likewise, our comfort in being among friends may suffer. But *not* doing that puts at risk any person who hasn't heard the Gospel story; at risk of going through more of life without hearing it. Our calling is to tell the story as well as to live the story. I pray that each of us is set free to respond to our calling as story-tellers. Amen.