

## EMMAUS ROAD SERMON

Alice Pettit – April 6<sup>th</sup> 2008.

Have you ever sat with someone, maybe glass of wine in hand, you have time, and you end up telling each other your life's story.

You might find out all kinds of things you never expected about that person's journey through life. You'll have a much better understanding of who they are, and you'll probably never look at them the same way again.

We all have a story – some are more typical than others, but they make us who we are.

And we all NEED a story.

If someone gets amnesia, they might be able to eat, talk, work, but they will struggle to function because without their memories, their story, they don't know who they are.

And we need much more than just our individual story – the stories of individuals interact and overlap to become the stories of towns and eras, those weave

together to make up the stories of countries that make up the history of the world.

In the end there is just one story – the story of humanity – and for us, that is the story of God and his creation and it includes main characters like Jesus – that is our story.

We say, this is THE story, that in the beginning was the word, and the word was with God and the word was God, through him all things were made. To cut a long story short – Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah, John the Baptist prepares the way – then Jesus – now the Kingdom of God is breaking in and one day – a crowd in heaven that no one can count from every land and race, saying “Holy Holy Holy is the Lord God Almighty” – we see God face to face and he wipes away our tears.

That is THE story of the world, everyone plays a part in it. The stories of individual humans, whoever they are, are all just one thread in this grand tapestry. Everyone is and should be shaped by the truths and morals and laws revealed in this grand story.

Because your story is the way you see the world.

It motivates you, shapes your ambitions and choices.  
It tells you who you are and where you came from and where you fit in.

The story, tells me that I am created by a God who is involved with and loves his creation. It tells me I have purpose on this planet, It shapes my life – because the story says my life should honour God, and it shapes my morals and ethics, because it says life is precious and I should not murder, and the planet is precious and I should not destroy it, and all people are of equal value so I should not show favouritism – the story tells me who I am and how to live.

We reaffirm our belief in this story when we say the creed, we sing about this story in our worship songs, and this story is told and embedded in rituals like Holy Week – that was a week of story telling.

For hundreds of years the story was endorsed by and embedded in the culture and laws of this country. Its acts and symbols like the Holy Communion and Baptism and Marriage and communal worship were widespread – and they confirmed and taught and passed on that story to each new generation.

But not now, not any more.

In today's Britain, there are many different stories being told, lots of stories, all competing.

The stories of different faiths and cultures, the stories of Atheism, the story of humanism, of consumerism, of nationalism, of individualism, all being told alongside the Christian story.

But these stories all give different answers to the questions – “who am I, what is my purpose, who is God, how does he relate to me, what is the future of humanity?”

They give different answers to these questions and so they shape the morals, and behaviour and priorities of people differently to the way the Christian story would shape them.

Some people have no story at all, only their individual story

For them, they (and not Jesus) are the main character in the story.

Without a big story, a wider context in a meaningful history, you can quickly end up feeling directionless,

cut adrift and unfulfilled, not knowing what to do with your life or what your purpose is.

This, by the way, is partly what people call *postmodernity*. When a people reject the idea that there is one big story, one metanarrative, to which we all belong, from which we all gain identity, in which we all play a part.

Instead there is a splintering into lots of different, competing stories, and you can choose your own story – or choose no story at all.

Perhaps this is why we struggle to work out and pass on an identity in this country – because there is no longer a story we can all agree on and belong to.

If your story is at stake, then everything is at stake. If you lose your story – you lose everything.

And the Christian story has been eroded away and almost lost from our collective memory and everyday life.

Not just because there are so many stories, but because we – the people charged with telling the story – have

forgotten a lot of it and have also lost much of the confidence and skill to tell it and pass it on.

Imagine I asked you, right now: “Stand up and tell us our story – beginning to end - tell us who we are and why we are – our story.”

What would you say, how would you feel?

What can we do so that every single one of us can stand up, at a moment's notice, and with skill and confidence tell our story?

What does Jesus do when he comes across 2 of his disciples who, have forgotten and lost confidence in the story?

As the two disciples walked to Emmaus talking about the last few days - they were experiencing a crisis of story, a crisis of identity.

They had known and believed the story. It began with Genesis, told them how God had revealed himself through a people called Israel, the story promised a messiah,

and they had hoped that story would continue with their messiah, Jesus, defeating the Romans and ruling in their place.

But Jesus was now dead, crucified by Romans, so what now, how could that story continue, and answer their questions when it's truth had been called into question?

They are confused. They doubt the story because they have seen Jesus die – or because they are 'slow of heart to believe' all the prophets and Jesus himself had spoken – and so they do not understand his death?

The problem is not with the story – it is with their lack of understanding and trust. So when something happens that calls the story into question, they lose faith in the whole thing and it paralyzes them!

But as Jesus tells them the story again, the whole story including Moses and the prophets, their hearts burn within them.

Before they even know that Jesus is alive again, just re-hearing the story captivates them again.

And then they find out what we now know too – that Jesus' death does not undermine the story, but is a necessary part of the story, foretold for hundreds of years before it happened, and that he rises again, confirming again the truth of all he said.

Then he is fully revealed as that story is culturally and physically grounded in the breaking of bread.

Their confidence, which was shaken by Jesus death, is fully restored by his resurrection, Pentecost and their empowering with the Holy Spirit – and by their better understanding of the story itself.

And so great is their confidence then that they commit their lives to proclaiming the story of God in the streets, first of Jerusalem and then of the whole world.

Things will happen that cause us to wonder and worry and question our story. It's positive and normal that this should happen.

But how do we react when this happens?

If something shakes our faith – be that a TV program, or a life experience, or a bit of the Bible we find

difficult – we mustn't sweep it under the carpet or let it slowly erode our confidence.

Instead let's talk about it with other Christians, study for ourselves, e-mail a Church leader, engage with these challenges so that these knocks actually strengthen our understanding and faith. And let's get a sense of how old and robust the story is.

It's almost funny how every few years someone rediscovers the Gnostic Gospels and makes a TV program about how they will 'shake the foundation of Christianity' and the program is shown and forgotten, and Christianity remains.

Our story is as old as time, and we don't need to be afraid that it will fail us – we can in fact take refuge in it and rely on it, because we can rely on God, and it's His story.

It tells the unending faithfulness, love and power of God, and the more deeply and fully it saturates us, the more peace and purpose we will have.

A story needs to be told, and all of us, everyday, are the storytellers.

We don't beat people over the head with it, but we diligently study and teach it, know and live it, and we tell it without ceasing,

because it is like giving water to thirsty people, it's like building a house on good foundations, it's like giving hope to those who have none, it's what makes the world and our place in it make sense, we believe it to be the truth that sets you free.

And we can't keep treasure like that to ourselves.

Freely we have received and freely we give.