

Tell the story

Let me introduce myself.

Curate, Wendy, endangered species.

Endangered not as a curate but as a Wendy. No children have been registered with my name in the past five years in the UK.

This is a shame as I've always been rather proud of my name, which has an unusual origin. It was invented for a play in 1904, which was made into a book in 1911. Any guesses on book and author?

When I was little I was, however, known as Woozle. Also from a book. Which one? I wasn't named this because I reminded anyone of 'one of the fiercer animals', but because my dad's name is Winston. So, his nickname was inevitably Winnie-the -Pooh.

Given this literary pedigree, it is perhaps unsurprising that I have always loved stories and that, since I became a Christian, one of the foundations of my faith is also story.

The story contained in the Bible has been called 'the greatest story ever told'. It is certainly the most influential. History has been shaped by it.

The lives of both individuals and groups of people have been entirely transformed by it.

It has been mis-used to cause wars and terrible heartache, yet has brought comfort, love and hope to untold millions.

Although it is referred to as a 'story', I am not implying it is a work of fiction, although there are certainly parts that are stories in the traditional sense.

Narrative is possibly a better description of the Bible, as it tells of God's revelation to the world: winding its way from a time thousands of years ago when only a handful of people knew of God to a time when knowledge of God is theoretically available to all.

Today we heard two readings which, in different ways, are both about story.

In the Old Testament reading [Nehemiah 8. 1-3, 5-6, 8-10], we heard how the priest Ezra read the law to the people. We heard of the tremendous effect this has on them. They listened with attention. They stood in respect. Then, as they understood the words, they worshipped, bowing to the ground. And finally, they wept – a hugely emotional response.

Now, if instead of the Old Testament reading, the Mayor had decided to read us an extract of one of the Local Government Acts, I'm not thinking any of us would be reacting in such a manner. The law is not best known for its ability to promote worship or genuine emotion.

But what Ezra was reading was not simply 'the law' but from the Torah, which we know as the first five books of the Bible. This includes a story which is absolutely pivotal to the Jewish faith – the story of the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. The story tells of Moses' leadership as God helps them escape from slavery and travel through the desert. Of the many times they faltered on that long journey. Of how God forgave them each time. It tells how God released them when they were captives. How he let the oppressed go free.

Ezra's listeners are hearing the key narrative of their people, a story that continues to this day to form the foundation of Judaism, and through Judaism, Christianity. That is why their reaction is so emotional. They are hearing a story that forms the core of their very identity and reminds them of who they are. A freed people.

In the Gospel reading [Luke 4. 14-21], we again have someone reading scripture. In this case it is Jesus reading from Isaiah.

And, like Ezra, he explains the meaning of the scripture. He tells them that he has been sent to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release of the captives. That the long-awaited day prophesied by Isaiah has at last arrived. The oppressed will be freed.

This is the good news, the Gospel message. That scripture has been fulfilled and God is acting in the world in a new, unexpected and radical way. That, as Bob Dylan would say, 'The times, they are a-changin'.

Unlike Jesus' listeners, we have access to the complete Gospel message – for we know of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. While they were trying to make sense of what he had to say, we have the complete story. Usually that is a blessing, but sometimes familiarity makes us forget quite what an astounding story the Gospels tell, and the impact they are intended to have on people's lives.

So, what does this mean for us? For surely, we too are being called by Jesus to tell the good news, to proclaim the Gospel? I'm guessing he wasn't just talking to the crowd in the synagogue.

How do we feel about doing that in our everyday lives? Are we full of joy at the idea of sharing the Gospel message or utterly terrified?

Even if we accept the challenge, how do we go about that? Perhaps we feel it's best left to others? To the Billy Grahams of this world. To the person sitting next to us. To Wendy, if she's so keen on the idea.

If the Gospel message is important, and I hope you agree it is, then everyone should have the opportunity to hear it. They might not believe it, or at least not at the time. But everyone deserves the chance to hear it.

To know that God so loved the world that he came to earth to dwell among us. That he was so determined that sin would not separate us from him, that he died on a cross. That the resurrection shows how God wants us to live with him for eternity. Freed from oppression, no longer captives.

One thing we can do, of course, is tell our own stories. The story of why we are at this particular place in our faith journey. Of who has been instrumental in that. Of how our faith has developed, faltered, perhaps even vanished entirely at times. Of moments that have tested us and moments that have sustained us. Of our belief and our unbelief. Each of us has a story to tell and that is very powerful.

Another thing we can do is tell people what we think we believe. This is a huge and rather scary responsibility. What if we say the wrong thing? What if we don't feel confident about talking to others about the Gospel message? And, of course, what if we are not entirely sure what we actually do believe?

I think it's time for another story. A true one.

Years ago, I taught a boy called James who went on to be a county standard tennis player. When he was about 13, he suffered a cardiac arrest on the tennis court. As we all know, his chances of survival were very low. But a random passer-by gave him CPR. This person was not in a medical profession, indeed had not even done an emergency first aid course. He had recently seen CPR administered by an actor in an episode of *Holby City*. This man saved James' life.

We may need to be like that random stranger. Seemingly untrained and ill-equipped, we may be the one person who the needs to talk about our faith with someone, no matter how disjointed our ideas or how inarticulate we feel.

We may just have to give it a try and allow the grace of God to fill the gaps.

I'm not suggesting we head out to the street corners of Hertford. I am suggesting that sometimes we will feel the time is right to share our own faith story or the core Gospel message with another person. This might mean talking to them, but might instead mean sending them a book, or texting them a bible verse or inviting them along to something.

They may not want any of this, but they deserve the chance to know how loved they are by God.

Luckily it is God who transforms lives – our job is simply to tell the story.