

# Jesus as story

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 14 April 2024

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Easter 3 B

**A responsorial reading from Psalm 4, as adapted by Jim Cotter; Luke 24: 36b-48**

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

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*'Tell me the old, old story, when you have cause to fear.'* Yes? No? Maybe? How do you respond to that: and, more broadly, to faith, and God, in Jesus, as story? Many years ago, on the radio, one of the radical thinking clergy of the Church of England was asked about how they understood God. *'God'*, they said, *'is the poem in which I live my life.'* Yes? No? Maybe?

Does that resonate with you? Many people, secular and faith-based, would be quite dismissive. Stories, and poems not least, they would say, are typically fanciful and not factual, fabricated and too often false. Of course, that kind of response generally lacks any self-awareness and is very narrow, and, often, quite ideological. Apart from not recognising that different expressions of life have their own characteristics and validity, they typically miss the way in which story, metaphor, and symbol, exist within all areas of knowledge. Science for example is full of different models, and ideas like evolution are themselves stories. Scientists are right in saying that life-giving stories are helped by empirical verification.

Yet, without stories as such, it is impossible for human life and consciousness to exist. That is something that liberals and progressives, especially in faith spaces, have often missed. It is not enough to point out the weaknesses in a tired traditionalist story: whether that be about creation, sexuality, or anything else. Even more importantly, we also need to tell a new story. Populist politicians, like rabble-raising religious preachers, know this well. Facts are malleable but stories, once established, persist: whether they are particular ways of understanding the body, the nation, the world, and, of course, God. All of us therefore have stories, conscious and unconscious, running through our heads: some of them planted there long ago, some of them picked up from the latest social media frenzy; some of them giving life-giving purpose to our lives, others providing scripts that limit us but which are hard to shake off. What then is our story?

One of the significant theological shifts of the later 20th century was back to understanding faith as story. I say 'back' because what such 'narrative' theology partly sought to do was to reclaim ancient aspects of story. For, from the 18th century onwards, modern thinkers placed huge emphasis on what it called 'reason', which, in the service of Western civilisation, it used to parody and dispose with the deep narratives, myths and symbols of others. We see this, shockingly, in colonialisation, which not only took the land and resources of others, killing and enslaving those who resisted, but which sought to eradicate pre-existing belief systems which provided health, meaning, and empowerment.

Theologically, this meant that faith became, as it is generally (mis)understood today in Australia, a matter of individual choice and propositions, based on modernity's obsessions with empirical experience and rational assertions. It also became preoccupied with the search for the supposed 'historical' Jesus and a desired 'kernel' of faith, purified from all that did not fit modernity's assumptions: all those elusive, but essential, things such as mystery, transcendence, and communion, based on story and symbol, nurtured in community.

Now, there are questions about wholeheartedly adopting some features of narrative theology. We cannot simply go back beyond modernity and reclaim ancient myth and symbol, even if that were entirely desirable. As an historian, I am acutely aware that, as on the London Underground, we need 'to mind the gap': in faith's case, the gap between different times and the associated difficulties of reconstruction. As a feminist and queer person, I am also wary of renewing faith as story without asking vital questions about the stories and symbols we pick up: questions such as 'who wrote this story and what were their interests?', and 'who and what is left out of this story, and what might they also want to say?' Yet I warmly encourage us to enter into faith, and God, in Jesus, as story, and to become fresh storytellers ourselves. For this, as we see, not least, in today's Gospel reading, is at scripture's very heart, as it is of God, in Jesus.

Today's Gospel (Luke 24. 36b-49) was written by Luke, who, with Jesus, is the supreme biblical storyteller. For just think about it for a moment: what are the most memorable stories of the New Testament? Among them are the Annunciation and Visitation to Mary, the birth of Jesus, the Presentation in the Temple, The Good Samaritan, The Prodigal Son, the story of Zacchaeus, the story of the two thieves in the crucifixion, and the Emmaus Road resurrection story: all of which, apart from some aspects of the birth of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel, are only found in Luke. Then we can add in the amazing stories of Acts of the Apostles, also written by Luke: including the Ethiopian eunuch's baptism, the story of the first Pentecost, St. Paul's conversion, and Peter's great dream with animals which helped the Gentiles become fully part of the Christian movement.

Today's Gospel comes at the end of the Emmaus Road story and is easy to pass over as simply the last of Luke's resurrection stories. Yet it is in many ways crucial to Luke's storytelling as a whole. For not only are aspects of this story highly significant (such as the gift of peace to transcend fear) the very physical nature of Jesus' resurrected body which affirms that divine life is not about escaping material reality but living to the full within it; and the importance of eating as an expression of sharing life together. Vital also is the interplay between three key features: namely Jesus, the scriptures (by which are particularly meant the Hebrew Scriptures), and the disciples, the followers of Jesus. What Luke is saying here is that the sacred story, or stories, of the Bible come alive as they are interpreted through the story of Jesus, and flow out in our own stories. The wider Bible story, the Jesus story, and our story, or stories, are meant to be in dynamic interplay. Moreover, this passage provides the hinge between the first part of Luke's Jesus story of salvation, the Gospel of Luke, and the second, the Acts of the Apostles.

It may help to consider Luke's work as if it were one of today's drama series we can view on television or other media. The Gospel is, as it were, season one – the Jesus story - of a sequel to earlier seasons of God's story related in the Hebrew scriptures, and season two is the Acts of the Apostles, the continuing Jesus story, or Spirit story. Today's passage is in this sense both a recap of what has gone before and a trailer, or taster, for the next season. The concluding verse, verse 49, is key in this: speaking as it does of a *'power from on high'* which will enable fulfilment.

For in addition to the scriptures, Jesus, and the disciples, a vital new role for an occasional character is thereby foreshadowed: namely the Holy Spirit, the one who will continue the story, helping to illuminate the scriptures afresh, take forward the work of Jesus, and empower the followers of Jesus. It recalls Gabriel's explanation to Mary, regarding her virginal conception in Luke chapter 1, verse 35: namely, that, "*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.*" In a similar manner, Luke is saying, the Holy Spirit which empowered the impossible in the last season will empower the community to do what is also otherwise impossible: namely witnessing to God's salvation flowing to all peoples in the continuing story of Jesus.

When understood in relationship to that overarching story, or meta-narrative, our Gospel reading thus presents much more than Jesus' final resurrection appearance and the assurance of peace in the face of the continuing temptations to fear. Luke presents at great vision of how we are involved within God's continuing dramatic story that involves Scripture, Jesus, and the work of the Holy Spirit. We are encouraged, not only to know that God is real, matter matters, and God's peace can cast out our fears, but also that we are intimate parts of the Jesus story and called to be storytellers ourselves. Just as we are the continuing body of Christ, signs and stories of resurrection, so, Luke is saying to us, we are also the continuing story of Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit. We are, as it were, the latest season, or the next season, of the Jesus series. So what will that season be about? How will the story unfold? And how will we tell that story?

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Luke tells us that the old story, the old stories, do matter; that, like Western forms of modernity and their 'rational' justifications, we risk violence to the sacrality of the world, to others, and to ourselves, when we simply reject, or reduce, myths, metaphors and symbols, to our own perceived empirical needs and interests.

Engaging with the scriptures is thus a vital part of the continuing Jesus story. Yet those myths, metaphors, and symbols also need to be retold in the light of our experiences of Jesus and of the Holy Spirit in our own journeys, including the light shed by the Holy Spirit through new people, places, and perspectives. For, in that sense, the story never ends.

Our task remains to live the Jesus story, the poem of God, through the physical characteristics of our lives, eating afresh the new catches of fish we find, and open to the Holy Spirit in the circumstances of our own lives, witnessing to that extraordinary power of love in the stories of our own lives.

In this is salvation, and the living witness to the possibilities of resurrection.

In the Name of Jesus, storyteller, story, and shaper of our own stories. Amen.