

Remember me and tell my story

Psalm 78:1-7; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13

Rev Jean Shannon

To survive in this world, we must hold onto God and hold onto stories and most important of all, hold onto stories of God. Some of these might be in the Bible and some of them are expressed through the stories of the lives we've lived.

It was a week of funerals. Clearly the Thessalonians were feeling it. At the time of this writing, Christians believed that Jesus would return any minute. The minutes ticked to days and the days to years and when the first believers aged and died, the congregation was in despair. When, oh when was the Lord coming?

Paul's pastoral letter is written for these people – in their time. He says that Christians should not grieve 'as other do who have no hope'. Too often this has been taken as Christians should not grieve. We keep a strong upper lip. We bear our pain in silence. That is not what he is saying. It means we grieve differently from people of no faith because we know we live with the promise and the hope of resurrection. We say goodbye to physical bodies and we miss them terribly but we also live with the idea that God gathers all into his arms; that our love ones rest and wait.

Paul is not specific. He doesn't speak of resurrection as a reward. He emphasises the difference between us and others is HOPE. Hope for a Christian is being with Jesus Christ. That may mean different things to different people. He does not define it. Paul says "...and so we will be with the Lord forever." It is God who secures the Christians hope and also God who is that final hope. That hope exists in a believer's anticipation. We know that it is not the end of the story.

How do we know this? Because of the continuing story in lives and deaths; in scripture and in the stories we tell and the stories we heard on our mother; father; grandmother's; grandfather's knees.

I had dinner with a writer friend a few days ago and she said she is increasingly aware of her mortality. She is studying and teaching memoir writing. I guess at a certain age, we all think of our mortality. My dad was always afraid that if we're not careful, other people will write our stories and we may not like what we read. After his heart surgery, he wrote two memoirs. One of them was a history of his family. His first chapter starts with Moses. And that makes sense. Where does the history of a Jewish family begin?

We heard some wonderful eulogies last week. Humorous and loving stories that accurately described the impact these women had on this earth. We met their families and we saw the love, the values, the behaviour and morals reflected in the

husbands, children and grandchildren. Telling these stories over and over again, engrain them in the next generation.

That is what God is asking us to do in this beautiful psalm.

Tell the old, old story. Speak to the young.

...he commanded our ancestors
to teach their children,
⁶so the next generation would know them,
even the children yet to be born,
and they in turn would tell their children.
⁷Then they would put their trust in God.

The psalm tells us that there is purpose in the teaching. To start, for the children to find hope in God. It not eternal optimism but rather the consistency of a god who enacts wonders, decrees and commands. A god with an unshakable, on-going relationship – ever there to pick up the pieces. It is their shield against despair.

And then, the story's purpose is to know the works of God and be able to tell these stories themselves. The stories are not about human achievement but rather about grounding customs that you will know where you came from and from whom. It is to protect us from a collective amnesia.

And finally, the purpose is to instruct; to teach; to commit a new generation to keep the commandments, to live a life of responsible obedience, to turn enemies into neighbours and live in a joyous, intimate relationship with God. Children should not grow up thinking they are unconnected but rather a link in a chain of faith, history and community.

And that history is founded in Joshua's challenge.

The people have settled in the land of the Amorites. They have married and set up farms. Life has become easier and they some have started to worship locally which means other gods, other faiths. Joshua reminds them who it was that brought them out of slavery, who it was that fed them in the desert and who it was that brought them to this fruitful, promised land. In the full reading of the chapter, he tells them the whole story again and reminds them, they are free to abandon this god at their own peril but that they belong to the children of Abraham and the traditions of that community. It is time to put aside their laziness and declare their faith. This is a defining moment. He challenges them to do it and states his intentions clearly.

He does this on the basis of story – the same stories our psalm asks us to teach. The urgency of the instruction was crucial at the time and is still crucial in this time of our

church. It becomes pretty obvious when I am planning a funeral with the family and the funeral directors that many, if not most, are illiterate about the defining traditions that give the church life. Sadly, the same is true for many sitting in the pews. As a result, the church spends much of its life in despair, amnesia and autonomy.¹

Paul ends his passage returning the importance of pastoral care. He moves from his own grief to encouraging Thessalonians to comfort each other with these stories. It is not enough to hear it from pastors and teachers. We must be able to hear and speak it to each other enacting as was planned, that we are all pastors and teachers and all responsible for the ongoing story. Mutual encouragement carries within itself a sign of the ultimate hope.

All He ever asked was that you remember me and tell his story. That is the structure of a funeral.

And that is what Jesus asks us to do each time we come to His table.

This is what Nathan Tyson said about his experience²

Sunday

**12 November
Pentecost 23**

Psalm 78:1–8 (1–7*)

This psalm speaks of the passing down of teachings as essential to the development of faith. My deeply personal relationship with God does not require weekly attendance at worship. My Nan used to take me to the Catholic Church at Matraville when I was around 6 or 7 years old, and then I attended Scripture classes in Primary School. This gave me a very basic awareness of the Bible, and of the need to “be good”. In high school I attended a 24/7 Boarding School, run by Priests from the Society of Mary (“Marist Fathers”). For 6 years I attended Chapel on Monday to Friday, Mass on Sunday, and Benediction on Sunday evenings. Fortunately, sermons were usually delivered in a Marist way, reflecting on the scriptures from a perspective of mercy and compassion, and this resonated with me. It helped me form my faith. Despite the occasional “fire and brimstone” sermons I heard, I was able to discern my way through these fear-based lectures to find a God of love and compassion, of mercy and justice. Today, I acknowledge that without people reading the scriptures to me, and explaining their content, without the many sermons and (mandatory) church attendance in my youth, I would likely not have the faith that I do. The passing down and teaching of the scriptures, and particularly the Gospels, is a gift to those who have lost hope, who may be lost or grieving, or who may be marginalised. *Question 7; TiS 41 We shall listen, Lord, to your teaching; Psalm 78.*

¹ It was pretty clear from our non-discussions around the Referendum that some congregations did not feel part of the whole Uniting Church and many did not want to hear or discuss the church’s position on the topic.

² With Love to the World, Vol 17. No. 4 Aug-Nov 23, p61