

PSALM 78
THE UP'S AND DOWN'S OF FAITH

Stories – life is made up of stories. On holiday, I was reading the fascinating story of Nelson Mandela and his life-long fight for freedom in South Africa, why he did it, what it cost and the troubles he faced along the way; it is a long story, so it took me two holidays to read! The bookshops are full of real-life stories, biographies of famous people who think that their stories are worth telling and that we will want to read them. They are not always right! Communities are made up of stories: one of the great benefits of Juniper Green 300 celebrations some eight years ago was the bank of stories that was collected, people who grew up in Juniper Green and who remembered what life was like growing up here. More recently a similar process has taken place for Baberton Mains, telling the story of the building of the estate and how life has developed there too, with stories of that community. Anyone who wants to understand the life of the community for which we are church needs to read both; communities are the product of their stories.

You have a story. You may not think so and you may not think it very interesting but you have a story. I discover the most amazing things about people when I hear your stories: the little old lady, who looked so frail, but who learned to drive during the Second World War on 40-ton trucks; she seemed hardly big enough to handle them! You have a faith story to tell as well. *Lost for Words* is a course we've run, and a lot of you have done it; it is about talking to people about the Christian faith in a quite natural way to people we know or meet. The course is going to give you a structure by which to tell people the gospel, the Bible's story; but an earlier task on the course is to mark out your own story. Here's a question: in your faith story, what would be the highlights? What would be the best bits? It might be the story of your coming to faith; or some time when God has particularly answered your prayers; or the day you stood up and professed faith in public; or something else. It is good to remember the highlights. Here's another question: what would be the low-lights, the dark days? We don't always admit to having dark days, but most of us have dark days, days when it seems as if God has gone away, or when our faith seems a sham, we are failures, God hasn't answered our prayers and we are angry and bitter. These are our faith stories; the perfect Christian doesn't exist, but so many of us give impression that we are; today we have permission to talk about the bad days.

Psalm 78 is a story of the faith of a whole people, a community story. It happens to be the people of Israel in the Old Testament. It is not an organized story; it is not the complete story. Someone has called it "A ramble with landmarks...it lingers at some points and bypasses others... not so much a journey; more a ramble." (Michael Wilcock) It is the second longest Psalm in the book, written by Asaph, one of the temple choirmasters. It was written to tell Israel's story, but for a reason: "*we will...*" (*Psalm 78:4*) Asaph is telling a story, the story of a people, a community, a nation. It is a rollercoaster of a psalm, because there are ups and there are downs, all the way through the story and just when think the up-story has won, down you come again with an almighty thud. First of all, as he says, he is telling "the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord" and the Psalm is full of the things that God has done, the ways in which He has blessed His people, the deeds of the Lord that have shaped Israel's life; they rejoice over these things, the highlights of their life. But, secondly, there are low lights, ways in which the people failed: there is their ingratitude, their faithlessness, their waywardness. The Psalmist is not frightened to tell the children of these lowlights too on the way of thinking that says: "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to relive it." We expect faith to be a bed of roses, life to be sweet when we believe in Jesus and when life is not like that, we think there is something wrong. Is there something wrong with my faith? Here's what life is really like!

The pattern of Psalm 78 is this: “here’s something good that God has done; here’s Israel’s poor reaction to God; here’s God continuing to love and bless His people.” That goes on all the way through the Psalm from the start in the days of Moses in Egypt to the time when David was king and is a celebration of his integrity and skill. It is a wonderful mix of the ideal life that God wanted for His people and reality, what life really was like with a flawed people who seemed to have this propensity to get things wrong. We know it is said that if you find the perfect church don’t join it because you’ll spoil it; there is no such thing as the perfect church anyway, so don’t worry! Come and join us! The church is this wonderful/awful mix of knowing the values and ideals of Jesus and His kingdom, and reality where we never seem to get it quite right and even church at times gets it horribly wrong; yet God is gracious and sticks with us; that is true for us as individuals, it is true for us as a community of faith, if the Bible is anything to go by.

Take the example we read from Psalm 78; we’ve already said something about this story, but let’s go a little deeper. God is leading His people through the desert on the way from Egypt to the Promised Land; they are hungry and start to complain. They wanted to persuade Moses to take them back to Egypt because they remember the pots of meat they had there! They complained and asked God to give them food. “*He gave...*” (Psalm 78:23f) As a result “*Men ate...*” (Psalm 78:25) “*They ate...*” (Psalm 78:29) Go to Exodus chapter 16 and you can read the whole story there and if you do you will see two things about this manna that God gave His people. First of all, it didn’t keep; they tried to keep it overnight, but it had gone mouldy in the morning, so they couldn’t keep it. Secondly, there was a new supply every day, just as God promised. It was an exercise in trust: God promised that He would provide and He kept His promise and they had to learn to trust. God kept this up for 40 years; it only came to an end when they reached the Promised Land and there were other supplies of food there for His people. The manna came to symbolise God’s providing; Jesus talked about Himself as “the bread of life”, and what He says about Himself is based on this Old Testament story, the One who provides for us everything we need.

Isn’t God good? What a highlight of the story! Can you pick out the moments in your story when you’ve tasted God’s goodness? Is it something that God has provided for you? Is it some sense of the blessing of God upon your life and life has been good? God has answered your prayers or opened a door for you to find something that has been good for your life. It would be an easy answer to that question to say “there has been nothing!” but that’s not true. There are times when we need to open our eyes and consider and see the high-lights of our faith as we have rambled through life. That should create a deep sense of gratitude in our hearts, being thankful for the blessings of God.

It is so easy to forget. Israel saw all of this, they saw the manna every morning, they saw God’s faithfulness and His continuing love and grace and were they filled with a deep sense of gratitude? No! “*In spite...*” (Psalm 78:32) What did they do? First of all, they kept on sinning, living their lives in any old way; secondly they did not believe, but they seemed to ignore God. In fact, they also began to take other gods to worship. For all the high-lights, there were these deep low-lights too; the people got things horribly wrong over and over again; this pattern keeps repeating itself all way through this story. God blesses His people, He keeps loving them, but they keep wandering off and keep ignoring God. The mercy of God is such that He keeps loving them; He doesn’t give them up!

This is where we have to be honest. Like every human being on the planet, we are flawed people. There are times in our lives when life is hard and faith is hard. There

are times when faith is tested almost to the limit, we have questions that seem to have no answers; doubts linger longer in our hearts than we ever imagined; we struggle to believe in the God who is good. On top of that, we make mistakes; we get things wrong; we mess things up, even in some huge ways; we wander away from God and best way to describe ourselves would be 'lost'. *"In spite..." (Psalm 78:32)* Yet somehow, we pretend that none of that exists... until pressed! I sat down this week with someone and her first sentence was "July has been an awful month!" This was all to do with her life circumstances, and her faith; it was nothing to do with the weather! She told me why and we had a conversation about all of that and how life could get better, but that it would not be an easy road. I'm not suggesting that we all need to tell everyone how awful life has been or how dreadful we are as sinners, but the struggles of life and faith are there; they do exist; they do not mean that we have failed as Christians and that somehow our faith is a sham!

We live in the gap. On the one hand, have a picture of the ideal, perfect life as a human being who believes in Jesus; Jesus shows us what that ideal human being looks like. This ideal shapes our thinking; we want to be more and more like Jesus. But on other hand, we are flawed human beings for whom life is a struggle at times, a ramble through a troubled world rather than a determined walk along perfect paths through Elysian fields. We live in that gap between the ideal human being and reality. We know what we should be, but we fall short. We know the will of God, but sometimes the best we get to is to say "I don't always do the will of God, but I want to want to!" Paul paints a wonderful ideal picture of the church in Ephesians 4: it is all about "one" and how the church shares that sense of unity and togetherness, the community of faith where everyone belongs together. But the church is not perfect; the church sometimes makes major mistakes and has so many flaws; as church, we live in that space between the ideals to which we aspire and the reality of life where everything is messy, troubled, full of flaws and mistakes.

So what do we do? We take the spirit of Psalm 78 to live by that! *"Then they..." (Psalm 78:7)* Remember what God has done; remember that Jesus, the ideal human being, walked the way of the cross and we will be reminded of that in communion; remember the high-lights of your faith-story and give thanks to God for them, be glad that God has been good. Keep believing: you are not a failure because life is hard; life is like that at times, sometimes incredibly hard; keep believing; God is still there with you even in the dark places which your life forces you to visit. Walk in God's ways, do His will; at least want to do God's will and want to be the kind of person Jesus wants us to be!

That's not a recipe for the perfect life, where everything is always sweet. But it is a recipe for a life of faith in which there are lots of high-lights, times when God is good and we rejoice; and where there are low-lights, hard times, struggles, mistakes. Our story as individuals is like that; our story as church is like that. We live in the gap between what we know we should be and the reality of life as we know it. This is where we are called to be the people of God, the people of the cross. This is our story, a story of great blessing from God by His power, of His wonderful deeds and His grace; a story of faith that struggles, of life that is flawed. Wesley's hymn has a sense of this in it: "Finish then thy new creation: pure and spotless let us be...changed from glory into glory..." Our story is the story of people who believe and want to believe more!