

ROMANS 10:5-15
STORY-TELLING!

Two 7-year old boys are on an outing, sitting together on the coach taking them on their trip with Beavers; they are sitting, chatting about the things that are going on and one is overheard say to the other “you should come to our church; it’s fun!” “Church is boring” says his friend, but “No; ours is fun; we play games, do quizzes; all kinds of things; it’s great; you should come.” The blokes in the pub, over their pints the conversation turns to phone hacking and everyone’s having a laugh about it and someone says “but it’s only a bit of fun, surely”. The Christian is able to talk about the dignity of the individual and why it matters that people are free and others are honest. It’s tea-break in the toddler group and a few parents are sitting round talking; they know each other fairly well and so can be open and honest with things; one shares some of her struggles about being a mother and how hard she’s finding it at times; a Christian in the group shares how her faith sustains her. Then grandparents are with their grandchildren on the beach at North Berwick; “grandpa, who is Jesus?” says one and the grandparent explains simply what he believes.

How do churches grow? How does this Church grow? How does any church grow? It might be because we have a wonderfully handsome minister, who is clever, witty, and a fantastic preacher – which, of course, we have! Or it might be another way! Churches grow as people pass on their stories of faith to others. Our 7-year old boy was telling his story, that he loved and enjoyed church; the Christian in the pub was telling his story of faith and how that faith impacts on his views and attitudes; the Christian in the toddler group was telling her story of faith and how that faith gives her strength to live her life. The grandparent on the beach was giving a reason for the hope within him. There is a rhythm to life: the places we go – Beavers, school, work, the golf club, the toddler group, bowling, the beach, the pub, the garden fence; the people we meet – family, friends, work colleagues, neighbours; in that ordinary rhythm of life, the places and the people, we can tell our stories of faith and the stories of Jesus; and not just tell the stories, but share our passion, so that not only do people hear about our faith, but they see how much that faith means to us. This is not happening at a church event, nor at a church meeting, but in the ordinary rhythms of life we can tell stories and tell people what faith means to us.

Telling stories is a great thing to do. I’ve been doing it already in this sermon; the four examples of people talking about their faith are based on true stories and some of you might recognise yourselves! Earlier we read the story of Jesus walking on water in Matthew 14: before Matthew wrote that story down, people were telling it. It took Matthew perhaps 25, or 30 yrs to write these stories down and in the meantime people were telling them. ‘Oral tradition’ is the technical term. It was the only way in which the early Church could tell others about Jesus, telling these stories, passing on what they had heard from someone else and so the new faith is born and spreads and Christian faith grows. Why tell this particular story? Why Matthew write this one down? To tell people that Jesus is able to do special things and that He is someone to be trusted, even when that trust is put to the test in way that Peter put his trust in Jesus to test by getting out of the boat. “Look what Jesus can do; He is someone you can trust.”

In Romans 10, Paul is reflecting on the message, on the story that we call the gospel. What has the Church got to tell the world? How do we go about it – there is something here about that process too! Someone has called the Church “A message tribe” – we

have a message to proclaim to the world, something to tell others. For whatever reason we have lost confidence in telling these stories to others: perhaps we're frightened of the reaction we'll get, that people will laugh at us or be angry; perhaps we're not sure about the story we want to tell in the first place because we're not really sure about what we do believe; perhaps we're confused because people, even with in church, have questioned the validity of some of these stories and so the ground beneath our feet is shifting. But here's the thing: it is a huge privilege to share our stories with others and see their eyes open wide in amazement at Jesus and their appetite is whetted and they want to know more; the other side of the coin is that, while we lose confidence, other people are losing faith and are not hearing these stories; no-one else will tell them Christian faith stories if we don't do it.

Paul has two things to teach us about the message we have to share, the story we tell.

1. Jesus is centre of story. Some of the Roman Christians were being persuaded that the story of salvation was all about them and their achievements; they were being told that by being good people and keeping all of the Jewish rules and regulations they could win God's favour and had to stretch for that favour, because it was hard to attain. Paul says 'no!' "*What does...*" (10:8) We don't need to do the impossible, because God has made His grace and favour handy and accessible to us in Jesus. The story is about Jesus and in particular here, the Jesus who is raised from the dead. "*If you...*" (10:9f) There are two sides of the one coin here; what we believe in our hearts is what we confess with our mouths; it is all of a piece. The key to salvation is Jesus and what Jesus has done. Here Paul's focus is on the resurrection, Jesus is raised from the dead to live forever and because He lives He is able to save us completely as we come to believe in Him. No matter who it that comes to Jesus in faith, they will find salvation; Jesus is able to answer the prayers of all who call on Him and Paul finishes this little piece about Jesus as the centre of the story with a huge affirmation "*Everyone who...*" (10:13)

There is enormous confusion around in our culture today about the Christian message. What do Christians believe? Churches have spoken with different voices or, worse, with no voice at all; people have heard different things and so their understanding of what is a Christian is confused. Some think that the Christian message is all about telling people to love one another and be nice to your neighbour and to animals; some think that enjoying the hills and green space makes them Christian because they encounter God in nature; some will think that they need to embrace 2000 years of Church history and everything the church has stood for throughout its history to be Christian. The New Testament tells us that the Christian story is about Jesus and faith; the story is about Jesus who came into the world, the teacher and healer, about Jesus who then suffered and died on a cross, about Jesus who was raised from the dead to live forever and responding with faith in this Jesus. The message is not about us, nor about the Church, nor about being good; the message is about Jesus and faith! It is an old story, but for so many people today it is a new story because they have never heard it told properly; the great thing about this story is that it transforms people's world when they hear it and embrace it.

2. Telling the story – Paul's question is perfectly simple and logical: "*how then...*" (10:14a) There was told a story of a missionary to some part of Africa in the late 19th century: he had gone to work with some tribe in this particular part of Africa and the missionary started getting to know the people among whom and the area in which he sense that God was calling him to work. Then he began to tell the people about Jesus and all that Jesus had done and how important it was for these people to believe in

Jesus and how much better life would be if they believed and what would happen if they rejected the gospel. The tribal chief interrupted the missionary politely; he said "If it is so important for us to believe your Jesus, why has it taken you 1900 years to tell us about him?" It is a brilliant question. The missionary's answer is not recorded. The Church has a responsibility in 2011 Scotland to tell the story so that people can believe and can call on God to save them! "*Faith comes...*" (10:17) It is not as simple as that, but the process does not work any other way. We can show people the love of Jesus by way we behave, by our concern and our Christian service, but at some point, for people to believe, we have to tell them; we have to pass on message. They will not catch Christian faith by some kind of osmosis; they have to be told the message.

"*How can...*" (10:14bf) God has called His church to pass on a message. It is a great privilege to be one through whom that message is passed on. Before, I've asked you 'who first told you about Jesus?' and for most of you it was a parent, a grandparent, a teacher, and for a very few of you it was a minister/preacher. I feel enormously privileged that God should call me to be a preacher of the gospel, to be called to tell the stories of Jesus and to open up the Bible so that we can hear and believe and find our faith strengthened; nothing that I say next would take away from the importance to the Church of having good, faithful, quality preachers. But 'preaching' is not about standing in a pulpit; preaching is telling the stories of Jesus, sharing the story of Jesus with others so that they might believe. It is vital for the well-being of the people in our community, for the nation and even for the Church that we all tell the stories of Jesus in other ways, at other times, in other places, so that your friends, family, work colleagues etc hear the stories and believe.

Here's how it works. God has called His Church to pass on a message about Jesus, to have a passion for telling others these stories of Jesus. We tell these stories to others and they hear about Jesus from us. The seed of faith is planted in their hearts and they begin to believe. Then they call on God for grace and on Jesus to be their Saviour and they share in the blessing of God on their lives. That's how it should work, but there are interruptions all along the way: Church may have no passion for telling these stories – so we need to pray for its revival because it is dying! We don't tell the stories because we're frightened – so we need to pray for strength and learn how to tell the stories with confidence. People don't hear and don't believe – there's nothing we can do about that! All we can do is tell the stories, and the rest of work belongs to the Spirit of God and to the people we tell.

How do Churches grow? We share our passion with others; we share the stories of Jesus with others; we do that in the ordinary rhythms of life. "Right where you are, God is moving to draw and connect people in the depth, risk and reality of knowing Christ." "Right where you are..." - in the ordinary rhythms of life, in the places we go, in the people we meet, the people we sit beside on the bus, that we work beside, that we meet across the garden fence, that we share a pint with in the pub, that we meet in the toddler group – in all of these rhythms, places, people, God is at work. Of course, we talk about other things; we'd be bland and boring people if our conversation was only about one thing; but we do need to be alert for the opportunities God gives us to tell the stories of Jesus, to share something of our faith, or the way faith shapes our attitudes, our life. Then you will extraordinary feet; your feet will be extraordinary! You don't believe me? You find it strange? Perhaps, but "*How beautiful...*" (10:15) There is something here about the privilege, something about the joy there is when someone believes our story, when faith is born, when eyes are opened and faith begins! Try it; tell them!