

I think wherever you go in the world, wherever you live, the power of story telling is so strong. In our family units, or in our communities, it is through the stories that we recall to one another that we grow. And us Irish are good at telling a story. 2 months ago I was leading the Drive-in Church down at the Leisure Centre carpark, and near the end of the night, the guy who was playing drums in the band came over to me and asked, “Are you the Jonny who would have done CSSM down in Ballyholme?” I confirmed that I was that very person. And then he asked whether I remember him and a few other friends strapping me to a table and taking me through the streets of Bangor? At that point the story came back to me as if it was yesterday. The story didn’t end very well, with me accidentally dropping off the table, hitting the ground, and then my friends transporting me to hospital to get stitches in my chin. Who would have thought I’d be reminded of the story 30 years on by one of the guys involved. Stories are so powerful. And again if you spend time with me you may hear stories like the day I hid under the school mobile as the headmaster was out searching for me after breaking a girl’s arm, or the day I was driving to deliver the engagement ring to Alison and took the car over the ditch in a spectacular 360 degree roll. Stories.

In the past few days I have sat with a grieving family as they have said goodbye to their loved one, and as we have sat over a cuppa, many stories are recalled that bring laughter and a few tears. Stories are there to remind us of how we were, and maybe more importantly how it shapes us today.

We tell these stories, I think, in part because they can bring us joy in remembering. We tell them because it’s important to remember. We tell them again and again so that we don’t forget. We tell these stories because they tell us and tell others about who we are.

The importance of story telling is that God has taught us to do this from thousands of years ago. There’s that beautiful picture in Deuteronomy 6 where Moses has shared the commandments with the people, and then he instructs them to share these with their children and the next generation of children after them so that God is respected, worshipped and obeyed. And there’s that instruction in verse 7 “Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. 8 Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. 9 Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates”. That folks is the power of the story being told over and over again.

We are continuing today our journey through the book of Acts, and in our passage today from Acts 11 we come across an example right within the text of a message being delivered, a story being told over and over. If you've listened to last week's talk then this story will be familiar, because Acts 11 is retelling everything that happened in Acts 10. You remember? It's about a man named Cornelius who is a Gentile, and he has a vision to send for a man called Simon Peter who he has never met. Peter in the meantime is praying and he also has a vision which shows a large sheet coming down from heaven with all kinds of food that to the Jews would be forbidden to eat. But the voice of God tells him to get up, kill and eat. This is so against Peter's beliefs. So when Peter awakens he's greatly puzzled, but Peter has no time to think because Cornelius' men are at his door wanting to speak with him. Peter goes with them to Cornelius' house. There he shares with these Gentiles the good news of Jesus also explaining that he now understands that God shows no partiality between Jews and Gentiles. While Peter is preaching, the Holy Spirit comes to everyone present. They are all baptized as followers of Jesus, and Peter stays with them for several days.

So that's Chapter 10. And now in chapter 11 we see that word is spreading amongst the Jewish followers of Jesus that some Gentiles have accepted the word of God, and everyone wants to know how it happened, and specifically, why Peter ate with and stayed with people who were Gentiles. So Peter explains to them step by step, and so the writer Luke repeats everything that just happened in the previous chapter. As Peter finishes his story, he concludes, "So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?"

And the apostles realise that actually Peter is right, they can't allow their traditions to get in the way with what God is doing, and so they praise God saying "So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life". For us living in the 21st century, all of this might be hard to understand that it was even an issue – the idea that someone who is not a Jew has the right to choose Jesus as much as anyone. But remember that throughout their culture, throughout all the stories that have been handed down through generations of hearing the Torah read in the synagogues, the Gentiles were considered as not having the same access to God as the Jews. The covenant between God and Israel had been marked physically on every male through circumcision. But I think the misunderstanding has been that in some way God hated the Gentiles. He didn't, because God punished even his own chosen people. God actually pitied those who were not part of his family, and we see

that very clearly in the story of Jonah where he sent Jonah to save Ninevah – there we see an incredible revival take place. It wasn't God's will to destroy it. It was definitely Jonah's will to walk away from it.

So Peter and the other apostles are not against the Gentiles as such, because they have seen how Jesus has walked amongst many, but they just can't envision someone becoming a follower of Jesus without adopting the same religious practices that Jesus himself did. Deciding whether or not Gentile followers of Jesus need to become part of the covenant tradition of Judaism is the major struggle of the early Church, and it permeates the book of Acts and the writings of Paul. And so we see this story of the Gentiles adopting Judaism getting repeated again and again. This realization - that God's Holy Spirit is in the Gentiles as well, that they too have received God's word, is a watershed moment that shapes Christian identity forever, and the writer of this story, Luke, rightly feels it cannot be emphasized enough. He wants to tell the story over and over to make sure we get it, to make sure we don't forget, to make sure that we don't hinder anyone from making their way to Jesus. Remember that repeating the stories that occur in our own families is really important to us to carry the heritage on, and Luke realises that he has thousands of years of history before him that now has to change. It's a massive undertaking of change, which continues right to this day about how some denominations consider what is important to them.

Luke is right to think folks will need reminding, because often they go back to their old ways. If you turn to Galatians chapter 2, you see here that Peter didn't always stick to the lesson that he learned here. Now you would think Peter of all the followers had had enough reminders from Jesus, but here we see that when confronted again with other influential church leaders who thought that adhering to the practices of the law were important, Peter reverts to refusing to eat with Gentiles. Listen to Paul speaking in Galatians 2:11, "When Cephas (that's Peter) came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. 12 For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. 13 The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray".

You see the importance of repeating the story? Peter is not only reverting back to his own ways, but he is now influencing some of the apostles around him. This issue is going to travel with Peter and Paul over many years, but thankfully

the freedom that comes in the Gospel has taken a hold on the Gentiles and so these communities are growing at an incredible rate. Nothing is going to stop them.

It's strange to think that Peter is influenced enough in his thinking that he turns back to his Jewish roots. But there's really no point in asking that question if we are not willing to look at ourselves, because we do exactly the same. We fall out of the good habits we try to cultivate. That's exactly why we need to tell our stories, why Luke tells this same story back to back, why God shares the vision with Peter repeatedly. We have to remember our identity, and remember the nature of the God we serve, remember that the message of Jesus will not be hindered, when somehow, like Peter, we forget.

You know in these times when we have not been meeting together as Church, God has placed on my heart a genuine concern for every one of you and I'm concerned whether some of us are forgetting the story of what Christ has done for you and me. God is wanting to remind you of his salvation story again today. I believe he's been teaching us new things about what Church is, and what he wants us to be. When we are not meeting together with the added pressures of Covid, it's easy to drift, to get bogged down in the anxiety and worry, and to occupy our minds with lots of things that are not God. I want to challenge all of us in love today. We need reminding of the story of how we came to know Jesus. We all need to be reminded of the Easter Story of Romans 5 that God has demonstrated his love for everyone of us, that while we were still sinners, while we walked away and became less interested in God during the lockdown, when we found ourselves wasting time on many of the other things to occupy us during these last 5 months, Christ died for us. Folks, God has been I believe doing a new thing in us during this last number of months. Like Peter, he has to keep reminding us of this so that we don't lose focus and see this less active pattern, this lack of discipline as being the new normal. That's not what he wants. I challenge all of you, wherever possible, to engage in being Church – that means for those that are able, to get back into our buildings – it is good to be together, even if it means we can't sing. It means we find ways of meeting and studying God's Word. It means like Peter in verse 17 that we cannot stand in the way of what God wants to do. I'm conscious that if churches across our country do not waken up from the sleep of the last 5 months, that we may hinder the work of the Gospel – Even in these strange times there is much to be done. So, if you are a youth and children's volunteer in the church, get engaged with your young people, think out of the box. If you are house bound, ask me for a copy of bible reading notes and I'll call round to

see you. If you have neighbours beside you, then why not invite them to watch our online services. Or in your own home, tell the story of how you came to know Jesus as your saviour.

Whilst today's reading has felt like a repeat of last week's, take it as a good reminder that God doesn't want spiritual laziness to set in to your life in these times. We need to hear the story again and again so that we don't forget. The story of Jesus reminds us that he doesn't want us to lose heart, it reminds us that his love draws others around us to love him to. And as we tell the story - God's story - we praise God like those early followers in Acts 11 - because God has given the gift of repentance that leads to life even to us.