

Proper 6 Ordinary 11 A – Our Part in the Story

Romans 5.1-8 | Matthew 9.35-10.8

I love big epic mythical stories, like *The Lord of the Rings*. I think one of the things I like about them is the clarity that we, the reader, have about the part that each character has to play in the drama. We can see the arc of the story and how the challenges and conflicts of the narrative are building towards a resolution.

Each character – sometimes including animals and non-human persons – contributes toward the unfolding of the conclusion by the way they take hold of the piece of the story that is given to them. And the admirable characters, those we wish we knew in real life, or who we seek to be like, are often inspired by the stories or lore of their own world.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, at a time of great peril, when evil seems to be getting the upper hand, Sam says to Frodo, “It’s like in the great stories, Mr. Frodo. The ones that really mattered. Full of darkness and danger they were...Those were the stories that stayed with you. That meant something, even if you were too small to understand why. But I think, Mr. Frodo, I do understand. I know now. Folk in those stories had lots of chances of turning back, only they didn’t. They kept going, because they were holding on to something. That there is some good in this world, and it’s worth fighting for.”

Part of living well involves knowing our place and our task in the stories that we are a part of. And the strongest, deepest story of all is the story of God’s love for the world - God’s desire to rescue people from helplessness and bondage into an eternal relationship of communion with God in a renewed heaven and earth.

Today’s Gospel reading tells us about the appointing of twelve apostles to carry out the healing work of Jesus among the lost sheep of Israel. This is the moment in Matthew’s Gospel where we see Jesus explicitly inaugurating a new epoch in the Jewish story.

Instead of the corrupt leadership that has left people oppressed and harassed, Jesus appoints the twelve – symbolic of the original 12 tribes and patriarchs of ancient Israel – to demonstrate through proclamation, healing and deliverance, that there is now another reign on earth – God’s kingdom of heaven. This is a realm where all God’s people can live freely and flourish, and fulfil their call to be a blessing and a light to the surrounding nations.

This part of the story doesn’t involve us yet. “Don’t take a road leading to Gentiles and don’t enter a Samaritan town,” Jesus tells the twelve.

But by the end of Matthew’s Gospel, that instruction has changed. A couple of weeks ago on Trinity Sunday we heard Jesus give a new commission to the eleven remaining apostles: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” Jesus said. “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Disciples of all nations. That includes us. Now we Gentiles are drawn into the story. We have received the fruit of this apostolic sending.

What’s happened in the meantime to create this inclusive new commission? “All authority” has been given to Jesus, the risen one, after his great confrontation with the Enemy. On the cross he endured an onslaught of this world’s hate and destruction, and he descended into unfathomable lostness to rescue a humanity trapped in bondage to sin and death.

Beyond this suffering, and the vindication of his resurrection, the good news of God’s salvation is for all people, and the harvest in which God’s workers labour is the entire earth. Those of us who have been baptised into Jesus’ death and resurrection are now called into the apostolic life of the kingdom of heaven.

We are citizens of this other realm and accountable now primarily to the patterns of life modelled by Jesus and those first apostles. Our life and death belong to God, and while our family, and our work, and the nations we live in have definite and lawful claims on us, our deepest allegiance is to this other kingdom, where Jesus Christ is both the Lord of all and the exemplar of how we should live.

This is our place in the story. We are to live and labour in this oppressed and occupied world while breathing the air of another, freer and fresher country. Because let's be clear - we have not been called into God's realm simply to enjoy a settled, comfortable and fulfilling life on the terms offered by our society, even though centuries of established Christianity in the West might have made us think otherwise.

We have been called to a task – to embody God's mission of love and healing and blessing. This mission was achieved in Jesus Christ but it is still being birthed, in struggle and suffering, within the heavens and the earth until all is made new.

Our scriptures give us lots of images and parables to help us understand what it should look like for us to live into our role. The New Testament epistles are especially fond of the image of a body – each person with a calling and gifts and a way of being that furthers the mission. The trouble is, except in job interviews, most of us aren't very good at naming the gifts we bring to a common task. And yet how can we nurture and really dig into our part in the story – in God's great epic of salvation – if we can't say what qualities and strengths make up our vocation within it? How we, specifically, have been shaped to contribute to the whole?

Our vestry has identified that this is something we as a community could benefit from exploring more deeply, and later this year Tristan will be leading a book study designed to help us consider these things.

But for now, a word of warning.

Immediately after today's Gospel reading are verses speaking of persecution, of family members betraying each other to death, and of being hated on account of Jesus' name. Proclaiming a better way in a world that would rather not hear the message is precarious and uncertain. Valuing the kinds of people Jesus came to uplift and dignify is increasingly unpopular in our profit-driven society. And human history is full of seasons where evil gets the upper hand and those living through those times have to decide how to love in the face of it, even at risk to their lives.

The apostolic life that has been tasked to us in baptism is costly. Nobody guarantees us any safety, and for some of us, our role in God's story will be like in the "old stories, full of darkness and danger" that the hobbit Sam talks about – stories where people have plenty of chances to turn back, but they don't because they're "holding on to something."

What are we holding on to?

Do we really understand that we have been called, gifted, and sent as God's emissaries of love and healing in this world?

Do we know the shape of our call, and the nature of our gifting?

Do we know to whom we are sent – what is the field that has been given us to tend?

And do we know, trust, and obey the One who sends us, and is always with us?