

See where the Lamb is guiding you ...

... make this story your own

A sermon given on All Saints' Day, 5th November 2023 by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster

Matthew 5:1-12; Revelation 7:9-end

So I wonder which stories shape your life? The papers have had quite a lot in them this week with obituaries of Matthew Perry, the actor who was one of the stars in 'Friends', a sitcom that was a big hit in the 1990s. And there was an interesting story about Matthew Perry that when he was a young man he prayed to God that God could do anything with his life as long as he made him famous - an interesting prayer, and one that in its way was answered. But the sad thing was that when Matthew Perry got the part in Friends and it was an almost immediate hit and he became one of the most well known faces, he said in an interview that was played again this week that within about six months, he realised it wasn't enough; that he wasn't satisfied; that it hadn't made him feel the way he had hoped. And that sadly took him in a different direction and he started to get involved in drugs and the rest of his life was a big struggle with addiction.

But it does raise the question, what stories shape our lives? What goals do we set ourselves? What are the things that we imagine will give our lives meaning? Each of us is hungry for a story that will make sense of our lives, something that's bigger than ourselves and will provide lasting satisfaction.

And as we look around the world, there are all sorts of different stories on offer, all promising in their different ways to make us whole and complete: some stories say that if only we can be successful at work, climb the ladder, achieve recognition, then our lives will be worthwhile; some stories say that if only we can get rich and have money, then that'll give us the freedom and the security that we crave to do with life whatever we want; some stories say that if only we can have a happy family life, get married and stay married and have kids, then we shall feel complete; some stories say you have to rebel, buck the system, 'stick it to the man', be different, break the rules, and then you'll find an authenticity that satisfies; some stories say that life is just too difficult for any of that, so the best way is to opt out, get drunk, get high, get laid, and then at least life will be bearable.

But on this All Saints Sunday we are reminded of another story on offer: a bigger story; a story that resonates with that deep hunger and restlessness in our souls. Because on All Saints

Sunday we are offered this vision of the saints in heaven, who as they worship the one seated on the throne find that not only does he shelter them, but that they hunger and thirst no more; they have found satisfaction they have been healed and forgiven; they've been washed in the blood of the Lamb; they've been made complete. And what's more, they've found purpose and direction because the Lamb at the centre of the throne, it says, will be their shepherd who will guide them to the springs of the water of life - a beautiful image of the Lamb becoming the shepherd.

My wife Sue and I always enjoy reading a good novel. Our bedside tables always have stacks of novels to finish the day with. And recently Sue's read a couple of novels where I've quizzed her as she's been reading them and I've said, "Go on, then, tell me, is it any good? Is it one I should read?" And she sucked her teeth a bit and she said, "Well, it's all right so far, but it all depends on how it's going to end." Because with so many of these novels, you have lots of different characters, you have lots of different subplots, you have different themes and issues going on. And you reach a point about halfway through where you think, I don't know how the author is going to work all this together, how is it going to resolve itself? And sometimes they pull it off and sometimes they don't.

But on All Saints Sunday, we are given a glimpse of the end of the story where we see all the different themes and issues woven together into completion and fulfilment. That's the story on offer on All Saints Sunday: the story of lives healed and fulfilled; of souls washed and purified; the story of how our deepest thirst can be quenched. Because the truth is that all of us inhabit multiple stories all at once - some of them are just fragments, or narratives about ourselves that we try on for a bit and then discard, like children with a dressing-up box.

But it all depends on how the story ends.

And the problem with the stories that the world offers is that none of them ends well. We either achieve what we think is on offer, we achieve those goals and discover, like Matthew Perry, that they actually don't satisfy. Or else we achieve them and yet then we're still faced with the problem of death. Which story is going to be equal to our mortality? Perhaps particularly as we near the end of our lives, we start to realise that many of the stories we've been sold are empty and they don't deliver what they promise - death leaves a whole lot of unresolved threads hanging with most of these stories.

But on All Saints Sunday, we're reminded that those who worship the Lamb aren't just citizens of earth, we're citizens of heaven as well - we're part of a bigger story: Here, we have no lasting city, but we're looking for the city that is to come; our story doesn't end in this world with our mortality - it finds its fulfilment in eternity; it doesn't end in loss and death - it ends in everlasting

life, life in all its fullness. And we get that every time we celebrate Holy Communion: at one level, all we're receiving is this rather unimpressive little bit of wafer and this sip of wine and it reminds of us a story that in earthly terms, ends in failure and death and despair - Jesus on the cross, alone, despised, rejected; and yet, as we receive that bread and wine, we believe we are part of a bigger story that leads to resurrection and life, a story in which the bread and the wine are just a foretaste of a heavenly banquet, a victory feast, an eternal celebration.

The theologian Walter Bruggemann once said that evangelism is the invitation to reimagine our lives, an invitation and a summons to switch stories and therefore to change lives. And so on this day, we're reminded that the Gospel offers us a better story, a story that is more true and more substantial, because it has a heavenly dimension.

And we're reminded of that in the Gospel reading: the world doesn't think much of the poor or of the merciful or of the peacemakers - those who hunger and thirst for justice and righteousness are often frustrated because these things never seem to come about significantly in this world. But Jesus says these people are blessed, those who live out the stories of compassion and forgiveness and justice and peace. Because these are the things that in the end give our lives weight and substance; these are the things that are eternal; these are the things that will be vindicated in heaven.

And those who have gone before us beckon us to follow: 'See where the Lamb is guiding you' they say. 'Come to the river of the water of life; drink and be satisfied; wash and be made clean; plunge in and be refreshed.'

Make this story your own, because it's more real than anything, than any of the stories this world has to offer. And it's not as hard as you might think.

Reading Texts

Matthew 5:1-12

¹ When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ² Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: ³ 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. ⁵ 'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. ⁶ 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. ⁷ 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. ⁸ 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. ⁹ 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. ¹⁰ 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹ 'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Revelation 7:9-end

⁹ After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰ They cried out in a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!' ¹¹ And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, ¹² singing, 'Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen.'

¹³ Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, 'Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?' ¹⁴ I said to him, 'Sir, you are the one that knows.'

Then he said to me, 'These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. ¹⁵ For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. ¹⁶ They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; ¹⁷ for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

