

Along the track

A Gathering Story

About fifteen years ago I was lucky enough to attend a synagogue in Jerusalem for that community's Sabbath worship. After the service, the community gathered in small groups to discuss the scripture readings used as part of their worship that day. The next hour was filled with a very passionate and lively discussion. Despite differences in their interpretations, there was a common bond. They loved this Book, it was part of them and they were part of it. They brought their life experiences to it.

These worshippers at the synagogue engaged with these ancient texts in ways I had not seen before. With an extraordinary openness, they discussed the meaning of these readings in the time they were written but also what they had to say to their lives now, what messages were offered to them. There was no "I am right and you are wrong." Being so open hearted and open minded requires a certain kind of bravery.

Stories feed the soul. They entertain, they amuse, they make us laugh and cry, they help us understand, and in some cases celebrate, differences. We need stories that give us a window into people and cultures that are different from our own so that we can better understand and appreciate the rich tapestry of Australia. Stories can create community.

The word religion comes from a Latin word that means "to tie or bind together". Religion attempts to put narrative around the experience of 'the human condition,' about the things that really matter to us in the here and now, birth and death, love, the good things that happen and the bad, what's right or wrong and so on. The Bible is full of such stories, such a narrative. If we allow ourselves to be open to it, the Bible's stories, its poetry, its songs, its language and symbols help us to reflect on and come to understand the meaning and depth inside our own experiences. The Bible doesn't simply give ready-made answers to every question. They help us to create meaning in our lives, to create community.

In the words of Pope Francis: *Never just skim the Word of God! Ask yourself: "What does this say to my heart? Does God speak through these words to me? Has he touched me in the depths of my longing? What should I do?" Only in this way can the force of the Word of God unfold. Only in this way can it change our lives, making them great and beautiful.*

Sometimes we are told: "Today's reading is about..." That may be well-intentioned, but it does curtail the work of the Spirit. Who knows what message the Spirit has for us in these readings today? This well-meaning introduction can shut down our openness to the experience of the Spirit at work within, no asking how God is speaking to you through these words, no wondering, no internal dialogue, no need for conversation. We short change ourselves when we approach sacred texts having decided or having been told in advance what they mean. It takes courage to be open to the unexpected, to let the Word of God unfold.

No matter how many times we hear these familiar stories, we can be surprised by them. If we think we have heard them all before, if we have our responses to the readings primed and ready, we might not reach any great depth of understanding and appreciation. We may not have heard it in quite that way before, or particular words or details have not struck us before. We can miss the layers of meaning, the subtleties, the complexities that lie within. New insights appear.

The readings during the liturgy offer us a gathering story. We come to hear them, to reflect on them, to share them and the meaning we take from them. They ask us to look inwards. The people at the synagogue in Jerusalem invited us to join in, to contribute, to share what we had heard in the readings. A gathering story does not belong to us alone but rather gives a sense of connection, of belonging, and that is rewarding and precious. But while having a gathering story, one that brings us together may be important, that is for a purpose. Gathering stories ask us to look outwards too. Communities inspired by the Christian story should always be listening and looking outwards to ask who in their world is in need of healing, freedom and love and how we can reach them.

Regards
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