

Sermon by Rev Dr Sarah Agnew
Wesley 9 am and 10:30 am – 4 Feb 2018

We might see in today's story about Jesus a snapshot 'day in the life of' ...

Gather in the synagogue with the community, go home for supper, meet with people and meet what needs he can, sleep, get up early and pray, gather with disciples and move on to the next town ...

If Jesus is our model for our way of life, such exemplars of what Jesus actually did come in handy, wouldn't we say?

Followers of Jesus, or followers of the Way as they were known very early on, continue to struggle, however, to know and practice how to live this Way, even with such a blueprint.

I hear people say they follow Jesus, people I see trying to be nice, not ruffle any feathers, not offend; people trying to do right by everyone but themselves, themselves instead they sacrifice like the birds and sheep in Old Testament stories.

But is that the sort of kindness Jesus showed – what about to ourselves?

I hear people say they follow Jesus, and in the next breath condone the rejection of asylum seekers, or rally against mosque or temple construction in their, or someone else's, neighbourhood; dismiss the unemployed as lazy, support grater logging or cheaper coal routs that kill ocean life ...

Is that the sort of kindness showed to others?

I hear myself say I follow Jesus, then go and buy more plastic that will haunt the earth forever, walk past the homeless begging on the streets, drive when I could walk, harbour a grudge when I could forgive ...

Did Jesus walk with kinder steps upon the earth?

My point is that we may speak words that claim we follow Jesus, claim Christian spirituality as the path we follow, but it is in the breadth of what we say and what we do, that we proclaim the one we follow. And we so often proclaim a version of Jesus we ourselves would never recognise.

What then are we to do about the dissonance between who we say we follow, and what picture our actions paint of Jesus.

One place to start is our relationship with the story – the Sacred Story of God's Way of Love that is told in the Bible and in the people of God. The stories of Jesus are not an instruction manual, not, after all, a blueprint to follow to the letter. If we all left home, wandered from town to town, practiced exorcisms ... already we can see how ridiculous a picture that would paint. This is not our world.

Paul's practice, which we hear today in the portion of his letter to Corinth, was to adapt to the world in which he lived, to each situation and the people he encountered.

This is how stories stay alive, how the Sacred Story has continued to resonate and guide – not as a literal blueprint, but *as story*. And stories live when they are told, reimagined, new every time they are heard, and yet always the same story.

I think the challenge we face, the challenge that faces any people of any tradition in any time, is to know your story well enough to live it with confidence and integrity. Then our actions and our words have the greatest chance for consistency, for painting a faithful picture of this Jesus we say we follow.

We must know the story well, not so that we can correctly follow some instruction manual – no, I'm afraid it's much harder than that.

We must know the Sacred Story well, so that its heart, its spirit – upper case and lower case – infuses our very being, so that our responses to the world are shaped by that story.

As a storyteller and scholar it has been the work of my past three years to attend to the way I and my fellow storytellers know and understand the Sacred Story – or the Bible – through embodied performance. The kind of embodied performance I was analysing was the oral storytelling practice I employ in which I learn a portion of the Bible and perform, or tell, it by heart for an audience or congregation. We talk about internalising the story, letting it become part of our being, so that we don't tell it from 'memory', but by heart, from our core, from our deep, embodied, knowing.

But any follower of Jesus can embody and even perform the Bible, the Sacred Story of God, without needing to be an oral storyteller or performance artist.

To embody it is to take it into your whole being, to encounter it with your heart and soul and strength. Your heart – your love for and connection to God and others. Your soul, the intangibles of emotion and cognition and the essence of you. Your strength – the tangible physicality of you and the almost palpable mental and emotional integrity and resilience of your being.

Bring all that to your encounters with the Sacred Story. ALL. OF. IT.
Jesus does.

To perform is to do, and the cliché that actions speak louder than words is true, isn't it? So true.

When you have taken the Sacred Story within you because you have engaged with it with your whole being, it will transform you. This is the nature of story, any story, they do not leave you unchanged. So pay attention to the stories with which you spend your time. They are shaping you – your thoughts, emotions, relationships, identity, actions.

To perform is to do, so perform the story of God, of Jesus, who we say we follow. And you can do the story when you know the story.

Jesus does.

So what can we see of Jesus who encounters the Sacred Story with his whole being in this day in the life of?

Skipping to the second half of the story, we see Jesus withdraw to pray. His heart – finding the space to be present with God. His soul – we’re not told *how* he prays, but prayer is soulful, a stilling of mind and emotions to listen to God. His strength – his physicality, he moves, he pays attention to location, there is walking, and it seems, sitting.

We are reminded also that bringing our all means bringing our limitations as well; limitations of time, space, energy. Jesus meets a lot of people’s needs, but Bill Loader points out that he doesn’t meet every need. While he is in the wilderness, people in the town are unmet. While he is in Gethsemene, people in Bethsaida are unmet.

And then we see in Jesus’s withdrawal to a deserted place his need for renewal, for prayer, for rest and solitude.

When it comes to doing the gospel, the story, God’s way of love, we can only do so much. But we must do what we can. Again, as Bill Loader notes, that will be enough. And it will never be enough to meet every need. It seems that Jesus knows this, and trusts that what he does will be enough.

From the reference to the synagogue at the beginning of this portion, and together with the previous and other episodes in the story of Jesus, we can see that Jesus is immersed in the story of his Jewish culture and practice. Perhaps it is this immersion in the story in its breadth that helps Jesus to keep focus on what is his to do in the context of the bigger picture of the realm of God. What he is to do – and what each person in the realm of God is to do, as the story tells us – is to walk the way of love, meet others with kindness, and be an invitation to others to likewise live this way of love.

I think Paul’s story also shows this way of love and kindness, to meet others where they are, relinquish our rights as they restrict us from our responsibility to love others, use our freedom to choose to be yoked to God and each other and find a different kind of freedom all together.

We can do all this, this living God’s radical way of Love shown to us in God incarnate in Jesus, when we bring our whole selves to, when we immerse ourselves in, the Spirit and the Story.

If we bring our whole selves to the story today, what might that encounter look like?

In my practice of embodying and performing the Bible, I like to begin with questions, with wonder. Not to skip straight to answers, or certainly not right away, but simply to notice the gaps in the story where things are left unsaid, for it is in those gaps that my story begins to connect with the biblical story.

Simon’s mother-in-law might provoke our wondering with such questions as – I wonder what ailed her? I wonder if she was ill the way I have been, or my friend or sibling or aunt has

been? I wonder what she did when she served them? I wonder where all those others came from, or how they knew to come?

Jesus might provoke our wondering with questions such as, I wonder why he asked for silence about who he is? I wonder if he got tired? I wonder if he felt overwhelmed? I wonder what, or how, he prayed?

We might wonder about the folk who were healed, and the ones who were not. We might wonder about the disciples and their hunting for Jesus in the morning when he had withdrawn; and we might ponder our own search for God.

In your fully embodied encounters with the Bible, begin with your questions. Note the questions about feelings – do they point to the way the story makes you feel? Do your feelings tell you something about your own story?

Pursue some of the questions with reading and listening to scholars who investigate the gaps and the history.

Simon's mother-in-law, described as having served – diekonei – may have made them a meal or a cup of tea, as many scholars presume. But she may, provokes Richard Swanson (he writes a blog and books called provoking the gospel) have been someone who connected resources to the needs of her community. Later Christians would come to use that term to describe a specified role in the church, as we do in the Uniting Church, deacons who connect resources to needs in the community. Mark in his telling of the story may indeed use the term as it was understood in his time, limited by gender to within the house for women.

But the years of retelling and living the story provoke the question as we bring other stories and interpretations of stories to our encounter with this story today, and we can certainly ponder and consider our own response to Jesus, when we are thus immersed in the story.

As Jesus was.

As Paul was.

To perform is to do, and we are called to do, to perform, to live, the ongoing story of God in response to that story of, our encounters with, God's way of Love. As Simon's mother-in-law responded to the embodiment of that story and that way of love in Jesus.

To embody is to take into your whole being – all your heart and soul and strength. After all, it is a story of love, a command to love, a way of love.

And we can perform in our living this way of love when we know the story with our whole being – so let us follow Jesus' example, with all that we are.

Amen.