OUTSIDE IN AND UPSIDE DOWN

PUSHING THE BOAT OUT

The story of Luke's gospel is the story of God's heart. It is the story of God himself pushing the boat out to reveal his heart. It is the story of God himself giving the utmost effort and resources towards showing his heart. It is, in other words, the story of God going to the most extraordinary lengths to keep his dream alive: the dream that comes from his heart of love: to know and to be known by the people he created; the dream of his heart that he can be found by us and we can be found by him; the dream of his heart that we might participate with God in who he is and what he does; his dream that we might know and experience that he loves us because he loves us because he loves us…

God himself goes to the most extraordinary lengths to show us his love. The story of his birth is a story full of the most unlikely characters. Those on the edges find themselves at the centre of the action. Those considered as unimportant get starring roles. Those usually forgotten are the first to know what's happened.

It is the story of the unexpected. It's a story that turns the world upside down and welcomes those on the outside in. It's a story of a teenage mother and a fatherless child who are welcomed into the story. It's a story of the broken-hearted with shattered dreams, who are welcomed into the story. It's the story in which hopeful travellers looking for answers are welcomed into the story. It's the story in which God goes to extraordinary lengths to show that there are no outsiders in his story, the story of God's heart in which everyone is invited in. It's the story of God's great love into which everyone is welcome and as Luke tells the story we see the story of God's great love lived out in Jesus.

One day Jesus is teaching by the lake. He is telling people what he always tells them, he is telling them they are welcome in the bigger and better story of God's great love. And he does it from a boat pushed out into the water: Jesus pushing the boat out another time for the people he loves. When he's finished

he astounds the fishermen, whose boat he's borrowed, with a huge catch of fish they hadn't been able to catch, and then he invites them into the story.

He invites them to be part of the bigger and far better story than the one they can see in front of them. He invites them into the story of God's great love and invites them to join Jesus himself in telling that story to those on whom God longs to lavish his love. And, unsure of everything that lies ahead, they leave everything they know, to follow and plunge themselves into the bigger and better story of God's heart.

One day, as they walk with Jesus, a man with leprosy leaps in front of Jesus and asks Jesus to make him clean. Jesus could have done so with a word, but he does what no-one else will do – he reaches out and touches this man. In that simple act Jesus says to this unclean man, shunned by everyone: 'You are welcome in the bigger and better story of God's great love.'

In that simple act Jesus demonstrates that he is able to make things that are unclean, clean. In that simple act Jesus does for this man what he wants to do for everyone: he gives him a new and fresh start.

One day Jesus is teaching in a house when suddenly there is a noise on the roof. Jesus waits while four friends make a hole in the roof through which they lower their paralysed friend on his mat. Jesus does what no-one else can do and he tells the man to pick up his mat and go home. In that simple command Jesus gives hope to a man who had no hope of ever being free of his mat. In that simple moment Jesus does what he wants to do for everyone: he sets him free of his mat – of those things that define and dominate his life.

One day Jesus is the invited guest at a party where the host fails to welcome him. A woman who everybody knows is a prostitute can't stand it, so she welcomes Jesus in front of the gathered crowd. This is an extraordinarily bold move. The host is astonished and indignant. Jesus tells the woman that her sins are forgiven, he tells her she has great faith and she can go in peace. Those words are both simple and profound.

In those words Jesus welcomes a woman who everybody knows is a failure and has sunk very low. In those words Jesus says to the woman what he wants to

say to everyone: whatever the circumstances of your life, and whatever choices you have made, you are never beyond God's great love for you.

One day, after a mission trip, Jesus finds himself the host of a picnic on a hillside. When Jesus takes the five small loaves they've managed to rustle up to feed this huge crowd, he tells everyone present that they are welcome in the bigger and better story of God's great love.

In this simple act that they all recognise, he is telling them that in God's story it's not just the important people, the rich people, the clever people and the educated people or those in the right people group who are welcome. Everyone is welcome in the story of God's great love. In that simple act he tells them what he wants to tell everyone: what I have is enough for every one of you.

One day Jesus gets into a boat, only this time the disciples push the boat out onto the lake. Jesus falls asleep when a violent storm threatens the lives of everyone in the boat. Terrified they will drown, the disciples wake Jesus who appears to be completely unconcerned for their safety. Jesus, standing in the boat rebukes the wind and waves and everything becomes calm. In that moment Jesus showed his disciples that the storm was no threat to him. In that moment Jesus tells his disciples what he wants everyone to know: that he is more powerful than the things that are a threat to us.

One day Jesus rides on a donkey into Jerusalem. That day the people worship him as king. But just a few days later, they gather again, only this time they demand that Jesus be crucified! One final time, Jesus pushes the boat out and allows himself to be tried, found guilty and sentenced to death. The one who came to show us the bigger and better story of God's great love, allowed himself to be nailed to a cross.

One of the criminals on a cross next to Jesus hurled insults at him, but the other asked to be remembered by Jesus. Jesus said to him: "Today you will be with me in paradise." In those gracious and extraordinary words, Jesus says to a criminal who deserved to die what he wants to say to everyone: it is never too late to embrace God's bigger and far better story, the story of his love.

Luke tells the story of Jesus birth, his life and his death on a cross. He tells the story of God's great love for the people he made. He tells the bigger and better story of extraordinary lengths God went to to show you that he loves you because he loves you because he loves you….

He tells the story of Jesus's glorious and magnificent resurrection. The story where God makes what can't be made so we can do what can't be done. God makes a way for us to know him so that we can participate in God's bigger and far better story!

And just when you think it's over we read this:

> When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.
> [2] Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven
> and filled the whole house where they were sitting. [3] They saw what
> seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of
> them. [4] All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in
> other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. (Acts 2 v 1-4)

This is an extraordinary moment. All the way through the story of Luke he has told us about Jesus. He has invited us into the bigger and better story of God's great love by telling us what Jesus did. Jesus himself invited others into his story to be part of it with him: the disciples, the ordinary people, those who already thought they understood the story. And then just when you think it ends, Luke tells us that it's just beginning!

Here, in these moments, Jesus is saying: "Ok! So you've heard the story and you've seen it in action. Now it's up to you. God live in the story. Go take the story to the people I love. Go tell the story. Go live the story. Go be the story!"

And as if that wasn't enough there's this:

"You don't have to try this on your own. You saw remarkable things while I was with you. But I now give you the most magnificent gift. The Holy Spirit! He will be with you and help you and guide you and sustain you in all of this."

What is extraordinary is that God invites these ordinary men and women to participate with him in his bigger and far, far better story; the story of God's great, magnificent and immense love. And we think that's fantastic!

Here is what is more extraordinary perhaps: God invites you and me into the same story to live in.

So, how are you doing? How are you doing in the story of God's great and magnificent love?

Luke reminds us that the bigger and better story of God's love is for you…. Yes you. He loves you because he loves you because he loves you…. But it is not, never has been, and never will be, just for you. The bigger and far better story of God's love is always, wonderfully for you, and for others: your friends, your neighbours, your work colleagues, your family.

Here it is – just one more time, God's bigger and far better story:

> If you've ever thought you were on the outside
> If you've ever thought you are on the edge of the action
> If you've ever thought you're unimportant
> If you've ever thought you've been forgotten
> Jesus invites you in – you are welcome!

If you've ever felt like:

> You're afraid of what's happening to you
> You've had your dreams shattered and your heart broken
> You've been overlooked, excluded or you're just trying to make ends meet
> You're searching, looking for answers
> Jesus invites you in – you're welcome in the story

Jesus wants you to know that in the bigger and better story of God's love you:

> Can be clean and made new
> Are never beyond the reach of God's love
> Can be free of the things that want to hold you and define you.

And in the bigger and better story the deep and profound truth is that God is enough.

This is the story that Jesus invites you, in these moments and in the days that lie ahead, to live in and live out. So friends, how are you doing at living in God's bigger and better story – the story of God's magnificent love?

The promise of Jesus was that it was better that he went away so that he could bestow the gift of the Holy Spirit to those living in and living out the story of God's love. The deep and profound truth is that God himself is with us as we live in and live out his story of love. In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke goes on to tell what happened when people started to live out the story of God's love. You can read those stories in the book he wrote.

Today though, I'm going to read a story that touched my heart and challenged me, and I hope and trust it will touch your heart and challenge you.

Johnny the bagger

Johnny works at a grocery store. One day he went to a training event led by a speaker named Barbara Glanz. She was talking to three thousand frontline workers for a supermarket chain – truck drivers, cashiers and stockers.

Barbara was speaking on how people can make a difference. She descried how every interaction with another person is a chance to create a memory, to bless someone's life. She talked about how important it is to look for those moments. She placed on the walls, as she always does when she speaks, posters with inspiring sayings. She told some stories and then went home, but she left her phone number behind. She invited the people at the conference to give her a call if they wanted to talk more about something she said.

About a month later, Barbara received a call from one of the people at that session, a nineteen year old bagger named Johnny. Johnny proudly informed her that he had Down's Syndrome, and then he told her his story:

"Barbara, I liked what you talked about. But I didn't think I could do anything special for our customers. After all, I'm just a bagger." Then he had an idea: he decided that every night when he came home from work, he would find a "thought for the day" for his next shift. It would be something positive, some reminder of how good it was to be alive, or how much people matter, or how many gifts we are surrounded by. If he couldn't find one, he would make one up.

Every night his dad would help him enter the saying six times on a page on the computer; then Johnny would print fifty pages. He would take out a pair of scissors and carefully cut three hundred copies and sign every one.

Johnny put the stack of pages next to him while he worked. Each time he finished bagging someone's groceries, he would put his saying on top of the last bag. Then he would stop what he was doing; look the person straight in the eye, and say, "I've put a great saying in your bag. I hope it helps you to have a god day. Thanks for coming here."

A month later, the store manager called Barbara. "Barbara, you won't believe what's happening here. I was making my rounds, and when I got up to the cashiers, the line at Johnny's checkout was three times longer than anyone else's. It went all the way down the frozen food aisle."

The manager got on the loudspeaker to get more checkout lines open, but he couldn't get any of the customers to move. They said, "That's okay. We'll wait. We want to be in Johnny's line." One woman came up to him and grabbed his hand, saying, "I used to shop in your store once a week. Now I come in every time I go by – I want to get Johnny's thought for the day." Johnny is doing more than filling bags with groceries; he is filling lives with hope.

There is a reason Johnny's lines are three times longer than anyone else's. Our soul needs to be fed, just as our bodies do.

When you live out God's bigger and better story you live words that can feed a soul. You might think Johnny had nothing to offer the store because of his particular limitations. In fact, it was precisely his particular limitations that made his gift into such a powerful blessing. There is great beauty in a person forgetting their own limitations, whatever they may be, and seeking to be a blessing to someone else.

In God's bigger and better story, God is able to take our particular limitations and use them to bless others with his story of love.

Know who the most important person in the store is? Johnny the bagger.

A few months later, the manager called Barbara once again to tell her Johnny was transforming the whole store. He told her that when the floral department had a broken flower or unused corsage, they used to throw it away. Now they go out in the aisles, find an elderly woman or a little girl, and pin it on her. The butchers started putting ribbons on the cuts of meat they wrap up for

customers. The people who make their shopping carts are trying to make carts with wheels that actually work.[1]

Johnny is a bagger in a grocery store expressing his heart. Is it possible that when we live in the bigger and better story of God's love and we begin to express our heart, God can use the very person we are to bless and transform others with his immense love?

I think so, and I think God thinks so too. So… could you push the boat out and see what happens?

Preached in Crawley Baptist Church, on Sunday 29th May 2018, by Rev. Ian Phillips.

[1] Ortberg, J. *"When the game is over it all goes back in the box,"* Zondervan, 2007 pages 158-160