

BETWEEN THE DREAMING AND THE COMING TRUE

Love is kind

What you will hear today happened between the dreaming and the coming true. What you will hear today is a story. What you will hear today is my story, it's our story, Lisa's and mine. Another way to say that is to say that what you will hear today is my, our testimony. We try to invite and encourage the telling of testimony here in CBC, and today it's my turn, our turn, although I am the one telling the story.

Some of you, maybe most of you, have been part of our story. Some of you, maybe most of you, will know some or all of our story. In the last couple of weeks as I've thought about telling our story, I've found myself asking: Why? Why tell our story? Especially if you already know it?

One answer is to say that to hear story, testimony, is to encourage one another in our faith. And it may be particularly true in these difficult times that encouraging one another is really important.

Another answer is to say that although it is my story and our story, it is more importantly, God's story. It turns out he is the main player in our story. This is a story, a testimony, of God's divine presence in our story. It is a story, a testimony of God's divine presence as we live between the dreaming and the coming true.

Another reason to tell our story is simply because it is true – deeply and profoundly true. And lastly, our story invites us, and maybe you, to ask this question: What is your Vision of God?

Our Story: Chapter 1

Stories are told in chapters, and although there are many more chapters to our story, here is chapter one of this part of our story.

When I became the Senior Minister of CBC, the church had planning permission to redevelop the old church. Pretty soon after, we applied for planning permission to completely knock down the old building and build a new one. The church redevelopment project was going to cost a lot of money. What we realised very quickly in the process was that no-one outside the

church was going to help us raise that money. We realised this was something we, as a church, had to do ourselves.

As a young, new leader, I began to realise I had, we had, a responsibility to find a way to give big to the project. I, we, understood it would most likely involve some sacrifice. What I felt God leading me towards, surprised me. I'll get to Lisa's part in a minute!

When we applied to train for Baptist Ministry I was adamant that wherever and however we trained, we would not sell the little house we then owned, and we didn't. But, once I knew I was to become the Senior Minister of CBC, I had an increasing sense that we should sell our house, and give to the church redevelopment fund.

It made me very nervous to find myself thinking like that. It also made me quite excited to think we would have to fully trust God for the future if we went down this route. I did not, however, want to tell Lisa of my crazy thinking. After all, I was the one who was adamant we shouldn't sell our house when I began training for ministry. I did not know quite what to do.

I struck a bargain with God. I'm not convinced that striking a bargain with God is actually sound theology! It is perhaps the one thing the story of Gideon teaches. It's not that it's good to test or bargain with God, that is not what Gideon's story teaches. But it is more that God can be gracious and kind to us, even if we are foolish enough to think we can bargain with him.

My bargain with God was: if it's you calling us to sell our house, will you please tell Lisa, because I'm not going to.

One Sunday evening, a few weeks later, Lisa told me she had something to tell me. She had felt God saying to her we should sell our house and give the money to the redevelopment project! We had not previously talked about it or discussed it as a possibility.

So, we sold our house and gave as much as we could to the redevelopment project. We kept some money for Meg and Zac's university fund and a little to visit Lisa's family in the US, but we gave most of the profit to CBC. We knew that a consequence of selling our house was that we would have to trust God for the future. A future, that at the time, 20 years ago, seemed way off.

I have said, and said then, I am not particularly bothered what house I live in. And I also said, all those years ago, that, in the end, God would provide for the

future. And, all those years ago, I confidently believed that. It was a time when faith was strong and the future was both daunting and exciting in equal measure.

Some stories have interludes between chapters as a way of reflecting on what's happening. So, this is the interlude!

I've grown older, we've grown older, since those early days in ministry. We've been in this building for nearly 20 years now and I found myself asking questions: would the building have been built without the relatively small amount we were able to give? How wise was it really to sell our house?

The truth is that as time went by both Lisa and I struggled more with the decision we'd made. The prospect of having no house after leaving ministry began to weigh more heavily. We became more convinced that if we could have our time again – we wouldn't do it again! We began to explore options and found it hard to discover there really weren't many! Having been so confident in trusting God for the future, I, we, were struggling more the nearer the future became.

Our Story: Chapter 2

My mum died on 1st July 2020, fifty years to the day after her husband, my dad died. It was a shock that neither my brother, sister or I saw coming. Three months before my dad died at the age of 35, his best friend persuaded him to take out a life insurance policy. My mum joked with him that he was worth more to her dead than alive. She told me that that is the thing she most regretted ever saying. Three months later he was dead.

He was a vicar. They had no house. But the insurance bought mum a house for us to live in.

When mum died, I, we, inherited from the sale of the bungalow mum had lived in. We took advice from Simon and Sarah Roughsedge, whom some of you know, and they and their colleague, helped us think about the future.

On 7th January 2022, Lisa and I and Lisa's mum went to look at a house in Bewbush. We hadn't done much thinking about buying a house and we didn't even know if we could get a mortgage, but we went to look at a house because Caryn likes looking at houses! And what did we have to lose? The house was lovely and by the time we left it, both Lisa and I were thinking the same thing.

To be honest we both thought we had little chance of buying it – it would be very popular and someone would be prepared to offer more than we could afford. But, the next morning we put in an offer! We wrote a note with it saying why we liked it, that it would be the place we would not live in now, but retire to... and oh... we had no chain so would be great buyers!

Turns out the sellers liked our note and said if we matched the higher offers they'd had, they'd like to sell to us. It was a no brainer – we said Yes! Even though we didn't know we'd be able to get a mortgage!

The next day we met with Tracey, our advisor, and we were able to get a mortgage in principle – so could make a firm offer. Three days later, on the Friday we had the firm offer of a mortgage. Within a week of going to see that house we had an offer accepted and a mortgage in place. On the Monday, NatWest put up their interest rate – we got in in the nick of time!

It turned out that our sellers were buying a house together with his family – so two houses to sell and one to buy. We asked about the sale of the other houses. The parents house was being bought by 1st time buyers, so no chain there! The house they were both buying was vacant possession so no chain their either! There was no chain at all – anywhere!

We completed on 28th March – less than three months after looking at the house.

On 9th April I was 58. Turns out 58 is a significant age for getting a mortgage. I didn't know that, but we got our mortgage when I was 57 and because the sale went through so quickly we didn't have to re-apply as sometimes happens.

Because of my age and the cost of the mortgage, we can't afford to live in our house. We had tenants move in a week ago – less than a month after completion. They liked the house so much they offered to pay more than the advertised monthly rent. The truth is, for us to make this work, we need all the help financially we can get!

An interlude at the end of chapter two

I, we, have reflected a great deal on the chapter I have just told. I can come to no other conclusion that God, in his love, has been kind to us, very kind indeed. All of a sudden, and right up to the line, we have a house for the future.

There are things I wrestle with, though. One is simply the timing of my mum's death. As it turned out, for us and our inheritance, the timing was perfect. We

couldn't have bought a house earlier because we simply didn't have the money. If mum had died a year later we might have really struggled to get a mortgage. Do I think God caused mum to die so I could have a house? No, I don't! But I do think it shows how God finds ways to be kind in circumstances that we wouldn't choose.

Mum had a house because dad died. I have a house because mum died. It does seem that God is quite capable of being kind because he cares for those he loves.

If I'm honest, I would love for God to stop the tragedy that is happening in Ukraine. In many ways I don't understand why, he doesn't. And, telling my, our, story while it still goes on causes me to be a little uncomfortable. God, it appears, is at work in the mess, but not always in ways that I can see. And for those things I don't understand, I have to commit myself to trust that God is kind.

Our story: Chapter 3

This is a short chapter.

1 Samuel 7 v 12 says this: 'Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, saying – "Thus far the Lord has helped us."

Maybe we should name our house Ebenezer! It is true that thus far God has helped us We have to figure out how to respond to a God who has been kind to us. We have to trust again.

Epilogue

There is an epilogue.

Your story is not our story. I have told our story simply because it is true.

Job went through what might be described as one of the toughest experiences recorded in the Bible. Job lost everything apart from his wife. His friends made things worse! Job wrestled in understanding what God was, or was not doing. For a long time, God remained silent.

When God did speak, he didn't answer any of Job's questions but took him on a tour of the universe. I think the best way of understanding that, is that God graciously and lovingly showed Job what kind of God he is. Job's response is as profound as it is simple.

Then Job replied to the LORD:

²“I know that you can do all things;
no purpose of yours can be thwarted.

³You asked, ‘Who is this that obscures my plans without knowledge?’
Surely I spoke of things I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me to know.

⁴“You said, ‘Listen now, and I will speak;
I will question you,
and you shall answer me.’

⁵My ears had heard of you
but now my eyes have seen you.

⁶Therefore I despise myself
and repent in dust and ashes. (Job 42 v 1-6)

I think another way of saying that is to say ‘God is enough!’ In the mess of everything Job had experienced, Job discovered God is enough because of the kind of God he is. Perhaps another way of saying what Job discovered is what Paul wrote centuries later:

³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

(Romans 8 v 38+39)

The deep and profound truth is that God’s love has no limit. Nothing in Job’s life could separate him from God’s love. My testimony, our testimony, is that thus far the Lord has helped us because we cannot be separated from God’s love.

Paul tells us in his classic treatise on love in Corinthians, that love is two things: it is patient and it is kind. God has graciously shown Lisa and me that he is indeed both patient and kind. We have to figure out how we will respond to the God who loves without limit, who is patient and kind.

Your story is not our story, but if God loves without limit, if you cannot be separated from that love, if that love is patient and kind... maybe you too must figure out how you respond to his magnificent love.

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