

June 27 2021 St.Lawrence/Bedmond 1.

Not so long ago, there was a spate of books and other publications on the theme of 'the Bible to be read as literature'. Some years before, C.S.Lewis wrote "There is a sense in which the Bible, since it is, after all, literature, cannot properly be read except as literature." I'm not sure I would want to go that far as I think it is perfectly possible to read the literature of the Bible as a centuries long exploration of the mind and character of God, culminating in the eventual revelation of God in the person of Jesus, and as an exploration of the life of faith. But then C.S.Lewis is well established as a legend amongst theologians and writers so the score is heavily weighted in his favour.

I do, though, treasure the Bible as a collection of wonderful literature so easily available for us to read and savour without ever having to leave the house for a library or a bookshop. And in today's readings we are so fortunate to have two great examples of poetry and of storytelling.

There's that beautiful poem, the 'Song of the Bow', in the opening verses of the second book of Samuel.

David has lived through peaks of adulation and hero-worship and troughs of escaping from attempted murder, betrayal and public humiliation. The king of Israel, Saul, himself almost certainly a sufferer from what we now refer to as bi-polar psychosis, has alternated between fatherly adulation of David the young warrior and fierce, all-consuming, murderous jealousy of the public hero about whom a song has been written – "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands". Through it all, Jonathan, the son of King Saul, and David have maintained an unshakeable friendship; a friendship so strong that in this 'Song of the Bow' David himself describes it as a 'love' so wonderful that it passes the love of women.

But now, it has all finished in utter tragedy. Israel, David's own treasured nation, has been defeated by the very people David himself has spent so many years fighting both against and, more recently, alongside, the Philistines. Yes, those same Philistines whose champion, Goliath, all those years ago had been killed by the young shepherd boy whose lethal use of a sling had set him out on his career as a military champion and an object of potentially equally lethal jealousy on the part of King Saul.

2.

And there, in that final battle on Mount Gilboa, both Saul, David's monarch, and his son Jonathan, David's treasured and much-loved friend had been killed.

Good poetry consists of both imagery and figures of speech and this beautiful 'song of the bow' is rich in both.

"How the mighty have fallen and the weapons of war perished!"

"Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely; in life and in death, they were not divided: they were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions."

"How the mighty have fallen!"

We, haven't, of course, been through what David had been through. We have, though, been through and to some extent still are going through something which has unsettled and changed our lives in ways which have yet to be fully understood and defined. Our younger generation will one day be able to read the writings of later historians and, perhaps, recognise in them the experiences of their own upbringing through the Covid pandemic in much the same ways some of us recognise in the writings of today's historians the experiences of our own upbringing during the Second World War. Mind you, nostalgia's not what it used to be!

For all of us, though, let that beautiful 'song of the bow' serve as a kind of promise that even out of the deepest pit of despair something beautiful can, and will, emerge.

Then there's that masterly example of the art of storytelling we enjoyed in our Gospel reading. I'm told that three important elements of good storytelling are settings, characters and action. Well this one certainly has all three.

Setting? Jesus has been spending time and making quite a stir on the non-Jewish side of the Sea of Galilee. A storm has been calmed, a herd of pigs have been drowned and a madman has become sane. Now he's back on the Jewish side and he's once more surrounded by jostling crowds.

Characters? The ruler of a synagogue, his dying daughter, a woman with a haemorrhage illness which makes her a social outcast, some scoffingly unbelieving professional mourners, three privileged disciples and the girl's mother. Oh, and Jesus, of course!

Action? Crowd control, secret touching, public exposure, healing, restoration of life.

All three ingredients; so how does the storyteller use them?

3.

Quite cleverly actually.

First of all he puts two stories together, the restoration of the child of a highly socially acceptable Jewish man, the ruler of a synagogue no less; and the making whole of a socially totally unacceptable Jewish woman, too unclean, in Jewish eyes, because of her continuous haemorrhaging, even to enter the very synagogue that man ruled. Both show great faith in the power - and willingness - of Jesus to heal; but of the two it is the outcast woman whose faith is rewarded first, and the ruler whose faith and patience is tested most strongly as Jesus deliberately puts her needs first. Both pass their tests. Two unlikely companions in suffering and in faith.

There's a component of this story that probably doesn't strike us as forcibly as it would have struck the first Jewish readers and hearers. It's that number, 12. That poor woman had for twelve years been in a situation that would have made her feel that she was not even a proper woman. In her society, a woman's *raison d'être* was to be the bearer of children. Clearly, with her medical condition, the capacity for child-bearing was not available to her. Not only, then, a danger to others and having to be socially distanced in order not to make those around her ritually unclean, but not even a proper woman.

Imagine her horror at having to reveal herself as the one who should not have been amongst that crowd of people in the first place let alone actually come close enough to a man to touch his clothing! Those early readers and hearers would have gasped and held their breath as they waited to see what was going to happen to her. Women had been stoned to death for less!

Then there's that girl. She had lived as a sub-woman, as it were, for the same number of years as that poor woman had lived as a non-woman. Now, at the age of twelve, here she was on the threshold of what her society considered the right age for marriage and child-bearing, the very purpose, as they saw it, of womanhood. Now she lies there at the point of death, never to be able to fulfil the destiny for which she was believed to have been created.

Distraught as her parents must have been at the likelihood of losing a daughter, there was also that added shame at seeing the God-given role of continuation of God's chosen people remaining unfulfilled in their family situation. Then Jesus literally walks into their home and life is restored.

4.

Of course, the action of that story may well have happened exactly as it was told, but I think we would be right to sense the gift of great storytelling to lie behind the presentation. And, once again, behind it there lies a message for the readers and hearers.

We're told that when that woman had touched Jesus' robe "she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease". Great – but that was not the end of the matter. Jesus' power had not yet finished its work. Addressing her as 'daughter' and, therefore, restoring her sense of femininity, he tells her that her faith has made her 'well'. The storyteller (or, of course, Jesus himself) here uses a word that has a different meaning from the word used for the moment of healing from her disease. It's root is the word 'sozo', a word that gets translated as salvation or wholeness. What has happened to her, Jesus assures her, is that not only has she once again become a 'proper woman', her self-esteem has been restored through her faith. She has now not only been 'healed' from her disease, she has been 'sozo'd', become a 'whole' person.

It seems then that as we treat ourselves to the wonderful literature of the bible, that beautiful poetry of the "Song of the Bow" and the masterful storytelling of the healing of a 12 year old girl and a woman with a twelve year deprivation of self worth, we also develop for ourselves the hope and faith that when these awful times are over we will find that there is a renewed wholeness in our society and that beauty will emerge from the darkness of despair – well it will if we have anything to do with it!