

Trinity 13 2016 Bristol Cathedral
Luke 13.10-17
Canon Bruce Saunders

When I'm on holiday or visiting somewhere for the first time – if there's a cathedral or ancient church there, I'll probably look in. Many of you may do the same. As I go in I ask myself 'What's this place trying to tell me?' I think you can get a pretty good first impression of a church in less than a minute. Is it trying to tell me about its long and interesting history? Is it trying to sell me souvenirs or a concert ticket? Or is it trying to tell me, the average visitor who could be from any part of the world, something about Christian faith?

In one Cathedral I visited recently there were huge exhibition panels which certainly tried to say something about our faith. The first began:

Christians believe that the world and everything in it is created by a loving God who gives meaning and purpose to each person and thing.

Isn't that a great start! Right at the beginning, which, as we know, is a very good place to start.

The next important thing it wanted to say was:

No person has ever seen God, and no-one is able to understand God fully. But we believe that we know what God is like through the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth.

Again, I thought, excellent. We believe God is Christ-like. That's very like the Dean's piece on the Bristol Cathedral website. It goes on:

Jesus was born in about 4BC in Bethlehem and grew up in Nazareth, both places being in present-day modern Israel.

Again, yes! Those words place Jesus firmly in human history, show that we're aware of dating difficulties – born in 4BC – and give him a solid geographical reference.

So far, so good. What's the next thing they wanted the world to know?

He learned a trade as a carpenter-builder.

Oh dear! It does go on to talk about his teaching, his crucifixion and resurrection, but it seems to me an interesting lapse from the sublime to the gorbliney, from that huge vision of God's creative purpose and Jesus' part in it – to a tiny and, I have to say, dubious detail.

Once in just one gospel (Mark), people in his hometown laugh at him saying 'Isn't this the carpenter, the son of Mary?' The answer should probably be 'No, actually he's a bright young rabbi who's spent the last fifteen years in a monastic community in the desert studying the Hebrew scriptures.' And we know we're on slippery ground here because when Matthew comes to describe the same event, he has people say 'So this is the son of Joseph the carpenter from Nazareth'. We know nothing about Jesus' tonguing and grooving skills. But people like the idea – there are pictures and probably hymns, as well as that nice prayer about Jesus the master carpenter bringing to perfection in the workshop of the world our rough-hewn humanity. A nice image, but barely biblical, and just one piece in a very much larger jigsaw. And it's what we often do; focus on the details while losing sight of the bigger picture.

I've just done the same, in taking you down that pedantic by-way. I don't think speculation about Jesus' way with a chisel comes up there among the headlines which a mission-orientated Church should be proclaiming to the world. The detail, the individual jigsaw pieces about what Jesus did and said in first century Palestine are of course important, sometimes in themselves but moreso because of the bigger picture of which they are part. It's that big picture which transcends time and still connects with the different world we live in today, with the issues we hear on the news, with globalisation with Iraq and Syria, with being part of Europe or not, with our immigration policies, with our marriages, relationships and work. It's the big picture which gives us most guidance when it comes to living better in our complex and fast-changing world.

What is this bigger picture? I'll tell you. Start with today's gospel story of a woman, physically or spiritually bent double and unable to stand upright. We all know what that feels like. Jesus heals her without being asked. That itself is most unusual. The synagogue authorities object that he is working on a Sabbath. He calls them

hypocrites because they wouldn't hesitate to water their donkeys on the Sabbath. And the crowd rejoices. It's a very vivid jigsaw piece and it has things to say: about compassion, and valuing people whom society ignores; about taking risks for what is right and about denouncing hypocrisy. It's also about what we should or shouldn't regard as holy in our lives. And we could leave it there. A jolly interesting piece of a jigsaw.

The big picture is not about what Jesus did for one particular woman on one particular day in Palestine 2000 years ago. It's about what God was doing in Jesus, what God had been doing since before time began, and what God is doing today and tomorrow.

That Cathedral display board got it right by starting where the Bible begins - with a world, a universe created by a loving God, in harmony with itself, men and women together at peace within themselves, with one another, with the natural world and with the one who gave them life.

A paradise, but, as those stories tell us, quickly lost. The wholeness of creation fractured: men and women deceiving and accusing one another; their inner contentment spoiled by shame and guilt; their bond with the natural order broken - from now on men sweat to stay alive, women cry out in childbirth - and even the animal kingdom becomes hostile. But the deepest and most serious fracture of all - through our pride and greed, we throw ourselves out of God's presence.

The good news that we see in action in the New Testament is God, embodied in Jesus of Nazareth, healing that fractured existence, re-making creation. We are unable to re-enter God's presence, so God enters ours. Jesus draws men and women, into new kinds of relationship not based on gender, tribe, on social usefulness, or even on family. He heals people like that bent-double woman, to show that we were created for wholeness. He forgives people, to draw them back from shame into loving relationship with their creator and with one another. By breaking a loaf or two and feeding thousands, he reveals that the natural order can again be our friend. By stilling storms he assures us that we are safe again. By raising people from death and by rising from the grave himself, he shows that death is no obstacle to God's love.

The theological word for this big picture is 'Reconciliation'. Every little story we learned in Sunday School, every miracle, every parable, is a fragment of that big picture. We see it nowhere more clearly than on the Cross where God offers At-one-ment. Today's collect picks it up:

Almighty God, who called your Church to bear witness that you were in Christ reconciling the world to yourself.

Reconciliation is the one word answer to the philosophers' age-old question 'What's the meaning of life?' It's written on every page of the New Testament (and Old Testament too, once we open our eyes.) St Paul several times says that it's God's great purpose for creation; and it's the purpose of our lives too.

Life doesn't much feel or look like Paradise Restored. Suicide bombs, refugee camps, parents beating their own children to death and kids destroying themselves with booze and drugs. But that doesn't deny the reality of the Christian claim that in Christ God offers us and the whole creation a new beginning.

You may remember that TV series where high-heeled and highly made-up ladies in rubber gloves go in to clean up somebody's disgustingly dirty house. The householder is sitting on the sofa surrounded by greasy pans and empty take-away boxes saying 'I don't know how it got like this'. The angels in the marigolds say 'What a mess you've made of your house, your life, your world - you can't live like this.' They perform the miracle of lemon juice and warm water, they fix the fuse on the vacuum cleaner and they show the initially incredulous householders how to transform their world. And like all good messiahs, they promise that they will come again - to check up on progress.

In Jesus Christ, God offers us a new beginning, a new way of living. In Jesus Christ God says 'Watch me. This is how to do it.' Do it like Jesus did, and life is transformed. If we truly want to be what God wanted for us from the beginning, then God will free us from crippling burdens, still our storms, heal our inner brokenness, restore relationships and renew the earth. That's the big story of which the individual jigsaw pieces, like today's story, are just tiny parts. The details matter, but they matter most as part of the whole. It's the big story that will renew our world and it's the big picture we have to share.