

Brancepeth sermon
18 January 2026

Isaiah 49:1-7

John 1:29-42

Psalms 40:1-12

*Open our ears, O Lord,
to hear your word and know your voice.
Speak to our hearts and strengthen our wills,
that we may serve you today and always. Amen*

The question I want to explore today is,
‘What kind of story, what kind of drama, are we involved in,
as Christians, as members of Christ’s church,
followers of Jesus?’

What kind of story have we got ourselves into?

Now, I realise that it may not yet be obvious
what I'm getting at when I ask that,
but bear with me for a bit, and I hope it will become clear.

So: What kind of story, what kind of drama, are we involved in,
as followers of Jesus?

Well, looking at our readings today, one answer would be,
that it is a big, bold story,
a high drama, a narrative acted out on a huge stage,
in which everything is at stake.

Think of our reading from Isaiah,
which Christians have long taken as a passage
that they can apply directly to Jesus,
a passage that sets out something of his identity and mission.

It begins, 'Listen to me, O coastlands,
pay attention, you peoples from far away!' –
calling on the widest possible audience to pay attention,
and so setting the scene for a spectacle.

And then we get promises made over an unborn child,
that he will be a ‘sharp sword’, a ‘polished arrow’ –
clearly a hero for the grand drama that is about to play out,
a hero who is going to do amazing things;
he is one who will work wonders
to gather the people of Israel back from exile
to transform their situation, their history.
And the story is even bigger than that!
God says ‘It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
[just] to raise up the tribes of *Jacob*
and to restore the survivors of *Israel*;
[No!], I will give you as a light to [all] the *nations*,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.’
In other words, the stage for this drama spans the globe,
every nation, every people – nobody will be left unchanged.
This is a passage that, when it is used to describe Jesus,
puts him in the widest possible context;
he’s a light to the all the nations, all the peoples of the earth;

‘Kings shall see and stand up,
princes, and they shall prostrate themselves,’ Isaiah says.

The story that is being presented to us is an *epic*,
with a cast of billions;
it is, as I say, high drama.

And then we can look at our reading from John’s gospel.
John the Baptist – already himself a dramatic figure,
gaunt and mesmerising, out there in the desert,
proclaiming the coming end,
and calling a trembling people to repentance.

He is someone whose eyes are fixed on coming events,
on the mighty deeds of God that he says are about to unfold.

And as he sees Jesus, he calls out loudly,
‘Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!’
It is a dramatic moment,
and, again, the stage on which it plays is as wide as the world.

Something is happening here, John says,
that is going to make a difference to everyone:
the defeat of sin's grip upon the whole wide world.

And then John's words are confirmed by the descent of a dove,
and although a dove may be a bird we associate with peace and calm,
so that this might seem like a quiet moment, an intimate moment,
it is still pretty dramatic –

because the dove here is the symbol of God's anointing,
of God's Holy Spirit descending visibly upon Jesus
to confirm him in his mission, in his calling.

It is, if you like, Jesus' sword-in-the-stone moment –
the moment when a hero's destiny is confirmed,
their mission set, and their dramatic narrative begins to unfold.
So this is, again, high drama, played out on the widest of stages.

That is the kind of story we're involved in as followers of Jesus,
a story of high stakes, of unlimited scope,
of events that will change history.

And that's all true, and important;
and I'm not going to deny it for a moment.
But ... it's not the *whole* story.

Because – look at what happens next.

Two of John's followers, hearing his dramatic proclamations about Jesus,
hearing, in other words, that an episode of high drama is taking place,
that they are on the threshold of a story that will change the world ...
well, they decide to walk after Jesus to see what will happen next.

Perhaps they're expecting something big to happen;
perhaps they are expecting metaphorical fireworks,
expecting drama,
fire and brimstone, or a blaze of heavenly light,
or something like that – something *big*.

But this is what happens instead.

When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them,
'What are you looking for?'
They said to him, 'Rabbi' (which translated means Teacher),
'where are you staying?'

I don't know whether they were tongue-tied,
not expecting to be addressed at all by the one
whom they have just heard described as the lamb of God,
God's chosen instrument for transforming the world –
but when he turns to them, they don't say something portentous like
'Oh great one, how would you have us serve you?'

No, caught unprepared, they say,
'Um, where are you staying?'

If we follow you right now, where are we going to end up?'

– not, it seems, meaning 'What great events will that lead us into'

'How will this change our lives',
but 'are we going to end up in this village
or the one over the hill,
only, you know, we haven't packed any lunch
and we don't know whether we should pop back for some.'

In other words, they ask a completely prosaic question:
'Where are you staying?'

And Jesus doesn't respond by saying

'Why are your minds set on what is here below,
rather than looking to what comes from above?'
or anything like that.

No! He says, 'Oh, come and see!'

and he takes them to where he is staying

- perhaps a room in a nearby house that someone had let him use.

They don't yet see the heavens opened;

they don't yet see him turning water into wine;

they don't yet see any great signs or wonders.

They see - what? - a straw mattress in a corner,

the remains of a meal,

an unlit cooking fire, perhaps?

'They came and saw where he was staying,' John says,

'and they remained with him that day.'

That's it. That, for now, is the story that they are involved in.

It is not, at this point, high drama at all;

it's closer to a kitchen sink drama -

it's a matter of their walking a short distance with this man Jesus,

and going back to see where he was lodging;

and then sitting around with him in the shade for an afternoon.

And this is one of those moments where the gospel writer gives us
an utterly prosaic detail:

‘It was about four o’clock in the afternoon.’

And *maybe* there’s some deep symbolic meaning to that,

but if there is, I must admit that it’s eluding me.

To me, it says that this little local drama played out on an ordinary day,

the kind of ordinary day that you or I experience,

a day with an ordinary afternoon.

The first thing that following Jesus involved for these two disciples

was simply spending some time with him in the heat of the day,

walking with him and then sitting with him,

talking to him as the shadows began to lengthen,

at the house where he was staying.

So, yes, we sing hymns, and recite creeds, and say prayers

that rightly speak about the big picture, the high drama,

about Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world,

about Jesus bringing down the mighty from their thrones,

and lifting up the lowly,
about Jesus as a light to all the nations –
and all of that is true; all of that matters.
(And right at the moment, there are some of the mighty
that I would dearly love to see brought down from their thrones).

But our own involvement in that big story,
our own place in that high drama –
well, it's very often a matter of the ordinary, the everyday,
of visiting someone's house, and staying there until four in the afternoon,
of prosaic details and ordinary conversations.
It is a matter of spending ordinary time with Jesus,
not necessarily by being caught up in some great revelation
or drawn into dramatic events –
though that can happen, and does from time to time,
but of the prosaic and the everyday.
Because our God is a God of the small scale as well as the large;
of the ordinary, the domestic, the uneventful,
as well as of the high drama and the world-historical stage.

God has made Godself present in the prosaic stuff of life,
in our meeting and our walking,
in our spending time together
on ordinary afternoons, and ordinary mornings like this one.

We may not know how to respond
to the big dramas playing out in our world,
we may not know what to think, or say, or do;
we may not see how we can make any difference.

But we *can* follow Jesus in the ordinary things of life,
walking with him to the next village, as it were,
and sitting with him for an afternoon –
asking what it means to be one of his disciples
what it means to respond to his call to love,
in our everyday decisions,
in all our normal relationships,
in every role that we play,
in all the mundane dramas of our lives –

because, in Jesus, God has chosen to be part of *our* stories
and we are called to be followers of Jesus
in *every part* of those stories,
however small the stage on which they play out.

Amen