

We are the Story

I have never been interested in joining 'anorak-clad' train spotters but I have always had a love for preserved steam railways. Sarah and Ally, were brought up on a healthy diet of Thomas the Tank Engine and his friends, Gordon, James, Edward, Toby, Percy and others. I fondly remember happy hours spent serving in the café, on The Festioniog Railway's Tan y Bwlch station. Interested more in the geography of routes and the journey rather than engines, Helen will vouch for the time spent riding the lines, such as the Ribble Steam, North Yorkshire Moors, Talylyn, Bluebell, and Severn Valley Railway.

The Severn Valley Railway was the location for filming the first Railway Children film. Set in 1905, Edith Nesbit's wonderful story is brought to life in two excellent films, all about the ups and downs of a family who's life is turned upside down when father is taken away from home by two mysteriously looking men. His prolonged absence meant that the family had to move, for financial reasons, to a more modest house somewhere in Yorkshire. The family, mother and three children – Bobby, the eldest girl, Phyllis and Peter begin a new life, near the railway. And what a life it turns out to be, shaped as it is by the railway. They wave, everyday, at the 9.15am London train and this routine becomes a focus of a series of adventures. The films, as does Edith Nesbit's book itself, invite us into the story; they invite us to relate to Mum, Bobby, Phyllis and Peter, to respond to their dramas and, in effect become part of their topsy-turvy lives, not as some curiously quaint, soppy and romantic Edwardian drama but as a living family drama just like yours and mine. We are invited to be part of the story.

Being part of the story is so important in our Gospel today. What thoughts do you have when you hear this passage? How do you respond? On Judgment Day, Jesus says that the conduct of the righteous and unrighteous will be judged. Jesus tells those that did feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty and a bed to strangers, cloth the naked, look after the sick, visit those in prison, will come and possess the kingdom. He tells the others that did not that they were going to be eternally punished. How much starker can it be?

Isn't there a contradiction, here though, between Jesus' words and those of Paul? Paul writes in Ephesians: "it is by grace you have been saved, through faith. It is not the result of your own efforts but God's gift so that no one can boast about it (2: 8-9)." In Paul's letter to Titus he writes: It was not because of any good deeds that we ourselves had done, but because of his own mercy that he saved us, through the Holy Spirit, who gave us new birth and new life by washing us."(3:5). But on reflection, there is no contradiction! Paul was writing about how people could become part of the body of Christ. Matthew is writing about Jesus' talking to those who are already his followers.

Jesus describes how both the righteous and unrighteous were amazed at how their conduct was viewed by God; how important, to Him, were the unexciting tasks and activities that had either been undertaken or neglected. It seemed strange that these small kindnesses, often forgotten almost immediately afterwards, had been remembered and treasured by Jesus, to be mentioned on the Day of Judgment. These seemingly small day-to-day tasks, the smallest of gifts, Jesus says, prove a true disciple. The righteous may feel that they hadn't accomplished much at all, yet, to the Lord, their

loving care of others is all-important. Luke tells us that Jesus told His followers: "when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind." (14:13). Jesus taught this and he lived it. Our Gospel is not about justifying our way into God's kingdom. It is about living our Christian life now while we wait for Jesus' return, as we try to establish God's kingdom here in our teeny weeny bit of God's universe. We are justified by our faith in Christ. We are known as a follower of Christ by the actions we take or do not as the case might be!

Something I came across recently made me think. 'I was hungry and you created a committee to discuss my hunger. I was in prison and you sloped off to your church and prayed for my release. I was naked and inside your mind you debated my appearance. I was sick and you prayed for your health. I was homeless - you preached to me how God's love would provide a spiritual shelter. I was lonely and you left me to go off and pray for me. You seem so close to God; but I am still very hungry, and lonely, and cold.'

As we are invited to be part of the Railway Children's family life we become part of their adventures helping people in all sorts of ways and situations. They make lots of new friends including Station Master, Perks, and as the story unfolds they give him the best birthday he has ever had, they avert a potentially serious railway accident by managing to stop a train just before it was to hit a landslide on the line. They care for Jim, a teenager who breaks his leg in the railway tunnel while taking part in a paper chase, by taking him home to look after him. And that 9.15am train keeps on passing the house each day, the children never fail to wave to the passengers and they establish a whole load of relationships based on nothing but that wave. One is with the 'Old Gentleman' who, in the end helps Bobby establish her father's innocence of spying for the Russians and overturn his wrongful arrest. Bobby goes, alone, to the station not long afterwards to meet her father off the train. She recognizes him on the platform, emerging out of clouds of smoke and steam and runs to hug him, simply says, 'Daddy, my Daddy.' It ends all quite emotionally with a full family reunion at the house by the railway.

Jesus invites us to be part of the story. No, in our Gospel we are the story. Jesus wants us to be the Christian story of building God's kingdom on earth. Are we anxious about not doing enough? Maybe we are but always we need to ask: what can I do to be a bigger part, to confirm my place in the story, changing fear and anxiety about judgment into love and expectation and experiencing and expressing God's love. Where do I start? I am reminded of Lewis Carroll's words: "begin at the beginning", the King said gravely, "and go till you come to the end and then stop." Jesus knew he wasn't the Messiah expected. People wanted a vengeful person who would vindicate them. Instead he was killed as a criminal on a cross. In so doing Jesus proved God to be compassionate, vulnerable, suffering, loving, reaching out in a healing and forgiving way that turned God's kingdom upside down. Today, in thinking of Christ as King, we see him as Supreme King over an upside kingdom. We are the story in reflecting a true image, in this kingdom, of a non-vengeful, inclusive God and we will be judged by a vulnerable, patient, humble and loving God. There's no vengeance or retribution in the story of the Railway Children; nor is there in God. We are God's story and our Gospel tells us that it is up to us.

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