WHICH STORY ARE WE LIVING IN?

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There are two competing narratives which explain and describe life on earth; the problem is that Christians we forget which one they are living in!
Category: Sermons and Talks

This is a longer post than usual. It is based on the notes for aÂ talk that I gave at the Mission Africa Conference in Belfast at the weekend under the title; TheÂ NecessityÂ of Evangelism. I could have mentioned the Enlightenment, logical positivism, a missional hermeneutic, gnosticism and other such things but I was trying to communicate with people, not impress them with the number of long words that I know.

We like to think that we are logical beings, making sensible decisions based on logic on reasoning. â€“ There are good reasons why we think that way and weâ€™ll come to those in a minute.

In truth, our lives are less controlled by logic and reasoning and more by stories.

We all live in many little stories that determine our view of ourselves, of the world and of our place in the world.

I grew up in a working-class family in the north of England and we had a story about our place. It was good to work hard, to be honest and trustworthy, but it was also important to know your place. The worst thing you could do was get ideas above your station. When I graduated from university and got a fairly good research science job; my grandfather told my mother that he was worried about me and said that he could have a word with the charge-hand at the Pyrex factory and have me taken on as an apprentice. People like us didn't work as scientists!

There are small stories like this one and bigger national or regional stories.

However, there is one story that we all share and that we all live within, thatâ€™s the defining story of Western Culture â€“ letâ€™s call it the human story.

The Human Story

The human story is simple, but it is profound and touches on every aspect of our lives. It is built upon one simple view that has underpinned philosophy for a couple of hundred years.

This idea is a profoundly simple one; it says that things can only be regarded as true if they can be proved by observation. On one level, this is a profoundly sensible view.

And this is why, as I said a few minutes ago, we like to think we base our lives on logic and reasoning â€“ these are things that are important to our society.

The whole of modern science is built on this foundation. Scientific method says that you create a hypothesis and then you test it by experimentation. The best and most elegant hypothesis in the world means nothing until it is proved by experimentation.

Now, some Christians seem to be opposed to science, they see it as opposed to their faith, but Iâ€™m a great fan of science. Let me explain why. I came over here from London this afternoon in a hunk of metal flying through the air â€“ and I survived! Chunks of metal donâ€™t naturally fly

through the air and land safely â€“ itâ€™s all to do with science. More basically, Iâ€™m 57 years old â€“ for most of history, Iâ€™d almost certainly have died before I got to this age. The fact that I havenâ€™t and that Iâ€™m in pretty good health is due to science. Knock science all you want, but donâ€™t use a sat-nav, the internet, modern medicine or any of the other products of human ingenuity!

But there is a problem with the human story. The problem is not with the idea of testing and measuring the things we can see â€“ the problem is that the human story says that this is all there is to it. The things that can be tested and measured are seen as true; everything else is merely opinion or speculation.

Everything which is not accessible or provable by being measured is pushed off to one side â€“ and this includes everything that is to do with religion, spirituality or what have you.

There is a divide between the secular â€“ that which can be proved, the things which are public truth and the sacred â€“ those things that are matters of opinion and which canâ€™t be proved.

Now, at first sight this might seem benign enough; but there are a few implications that we have to live with.

The first one is that religion becomes just a matter of opinion and all opinions have equal weight or value. You canâ€™t criticise anyone elseâ€™s values; theirÂ opinion is just as valid as yours.

Secondly, religion eventually gets squeezed out of public life. We hear increasingly that there is no place for religion in society. It should be kept out of schools, parliament and wherever. When there is a clash between religious values and secular ones, then the religious values lose.

However, the human story isnâ€™t the only big story out there that claims to explain life, the universe and everything.

The Christian Story

We Christians believe that we live in a different story, a story that is bigger than the human story and which explains the whole of history. I realise that you know the details of this story, but let me remind you of some bits.

The Christian story starts with God. God is the ultimate source of truth; not humanity. Right at the start, this is a fundamental clash of values with the human story. The human story says that things are true because human being say so â€“ they are the ones who observe and measure things. The Christian story says, that that is fine as far as it goes; but there is a much bigger all enveloping truth claim and that something is true because God says it is.

In the Christian story, you canâ€™t sideline the Christian faith and say that it is only a matter of opinion â€“ the Christian faith makes a much bigger claim than that.

Creation

The Christian story says that God created the heaven and the earth. Even though the earth has been ruined by the fall, God will one day restore it and there will be a new heaven and a new earth. Creation is important. The fist command that God gave to mankind was to look after the garden and to name the animals.

The Old Testament never downplays the importance of the physical world. The importance of the land is repeated over and over again. The prophets call the people to justice and equality. There is even a book given over more or less to the pleasures of sexual relations â€“ we tend to spiritualise the Song of Songs, but thatâ€™s a sign that weâ€™ve bought into the sacred-secular divide, more than a reading of the text on its own terms

Fall

However, the Christian story does not say that the world is neutral. It was created good, but through the action of Adam and Eve, the whole of creation has fallen. We see this most obviously in human sin in all its forms, individual and social, but even the earth itself groans, waiting for its redemption.

The human story tells us that with the right technology and understanding we will be able to banish human conflict and suffering â€“ the Christian story says that the problem goes much deeper than that.

Redemption

Again, I do not need to give you chapter and verse; you all know this stuff. But the Christian story tells us that Jesus lived on the earth â€“ God in human form â€“ and that he died and rose again. In the process, he paid the penalty for our sin, defeated the principalities and powers which ruled over this world and ushered in the rule of God â€“ we are living in an in-between age, waiting for the full realisation of the Kingdom.

Final Restoration

As weâ€™ve already hinted, the Christian story leads to an end point, a purpose. The time when Christ will return and God will judge the living and the dead and heaven and earth will be restored.

The Problem

Now, Iâ€™ve tried to cover 200 years of European philosophy and the whole of the Bible in 15 minutes; I realise that is ambitious and I havenâ€™t been very thorough. But the important thing is to note that is that these two stories are very different at some key points. For example, the Human Story basically says that there is no meaning in the world beyond that which we can measure, which

effectively means that everything is meaningless and the only thing we have to look forward to is the death of the universe. The Christian story says that there is very much a point and that creation exists for a purpose.

However, the thing Iâ€™d like to highlight is the different approaches to the sacred and secular divide.

The Christian story of creation, fall, Israel, Jesus, the Church, Eternity never separates sacred and secular. God is at work in earth as in heaven. We go from creation to new creation. Human beings are never presented as disembodied souls floating around in some sort of heavenly ether. We have physical bodies now and in eternity we will have resurrection bodies, like the one Jesus already has.

Likewise, Jesus cared for peopleâ€™s physical needs; I donâ€™t need to cite chapter and verse, the Gospels are full of stories of healings and such like. He even made sure that a wedding party didnâ€™t end in failure when the wine ran out.

However, the key thing is that although the Christian story talks about creation and the physical world, it does so in relation to God â€“ who (in the human story) belongs firmly in the sidelined sacred world.

Creation is Godâ€™s work. The land is healed when Godâ€™s people repent. Jesus miracles are a sign of the kingdom and rule of God. Lepers are cleansed, but they have to show themselves to the priests to prove it.

The human story says that what we can see is true and everything else should be sidelined, the Christian story says that you cannot separate creation from the God who made it. The material and spiritual are intertwined â€“ ultimately, this is shown in Jesus Christ; God who took on human flesh and ascended to heaven still in a human body.

Whatâ€™s the point of this?

As Christians, we live at the intersection of these two stories. We believe the Christian story, but we live in a world where the human story dominates and, sadly, we donâ€™t always distinguish between the two.

The biggest danger of the human story to Christians is that we become so accustomed to it that we forget which story it is that we are living in.

The sad fact is that, all too often, live our Christian lives as though the sacred/secular divide were a real thing.Â Salvation is purely spiritual; saving our souls and rescuing people from the earth. Who cares what happens to the planet? God's going to burn it up anyway.

This sort of thing happens in mission too.

A couple of generations ago, mission focussed on the spiritual. There was a feeling abroad that

evangelical Christians should not be involved in social action. Social action was what liberals did â€“ good Bible believers concentrated on the spiritual side of things, getting people right with God.

The important thing was to obey the Great Commission:

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,Â and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.â€™

Somewhere along the line, they lost sight of the fact that Jesus said that the greatest commandment was to:

Jesus replied:Â â€˜â€œLove the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.â€ This is the first and greatest commandment.Â Â And the second is like it: â€œLove your neighbour as yourself.â€

Matthew 23: 37-39

When people did remember this, the sacred secular divide meant that they would spiritualise it; the best way to love someone is to preach the Gospel to them. Now there is some truth in that, but itâ€™s not the whole story! Feeding the hungry, serving the poor and giving medical help are all part of the Christian duty.

In the 1970s, some sort of balance was struck and the Lausanne Covenant emphasised that both social involvement and evangelism were part of our Christian duty.

And that is where things have remained till today. These days we talk about integral or holistic mission; mission that involves all aspects of Christâ€™s command to us.

But!

There is still that sacred secular divide thing. And there is something else that Christians are good at; we swing from one end of pendulum to the other, without pausing for breath in the middle.

Sadly, these days, we tend to neglect evangelism in just the same way that we neglected social action a few generations ago and itâ€™s all a manifestation of the same underlying problem. Weâ€™ve forgotten which story we are living in.

Now, I reckon at this point that some of you are starting to ask questions. Surely no evangelical church, missionary or mission agency has said that evangelism isnâ€™t important? Thatâ€™s true, I donâ€™t think anyone has ever come out and said that, but the problem is that many of us are living as though we believed it.

Just think about what mission looks like in the UK today:

- Short-term mission. Now, Iâ€™m not knocking short-term mission per se, but it is very hard for

short termers to be involved in evangelistic mission work in another culture. Most short-term teams get involved in some sort of social action or practical projects. These arenâ€™t bad in themselves, but they represent a disproportionate amount of the UK mission enterprise.
- Financial appeals. There are lots and lots of financial appeals from mission agencies; again, these are not a bad thing. But it is very hard to wrap evangelism up in a funding project and very often they are limited to some sort of social action.
- Church initiatives; itâ€™s great when churches take on initiatives in mission; but for practical reasons these often revolve around social action projects, not evangelism.
- Mission agencies; the biggest and best known agencies in the UK are all primarily involved in social action work. They do it in a Christian context and the work they do is fantastic â€“ but it must be a concern that the primarily evangelistic agencies tend to be struggling, while social action agencies thrive.

Now, none of these things are wrong in and of themselves. Itâ€™s good that we have regained our Christian desire to serve the poor and suffering in the name of Jesus. The problem is when this is coupled with a lack of emphasis in evangelism and I believe that this is what we are living through today.

Another symptom is the lack of people being recruited to long-term evangelistic mission across the UK. It is incredibly difficult to recruit people to work as evangelists and church planters these days; whereas it is relatively easy to raise funds for famine relief or child sponsorship.

Now, you might ask whether this matters? After all the world mission movement has been very successful and there are believers in most countries in the world today.

Well that is true, but the simple fact is that most Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims in the world have never met a Christian and unless things change dramatically they will never meet one. There are billions of people around the world who donâ€™t know Jesus and our responsibility to go into all the world and make disciples has not changed.

So What Are We To Do?

I don't think that it is enough to say that we need to re-emphasise evangelism. That could be motivational and encouraging, but it doesn't address the underlying problem. Above everything else, we have to challenge the sacred-secular divide in our society and reclaim recapture the Bible story in its breadth and depth.

We have to read Scripture, not just study short chunks, but read big sectionsÂ of Scripture, allowing the broad narrative to soak into our beings and we have to be prepared to challenge the underlying story of the world around us. We have to reject the idea that Christianity can be marginalised and

squeezed into the corners. Gracefully and gently, we have to demonstrate that Christianity and the Christian faith have a place in our world. Make no mistake, this will take courage and it wonâ€™t be comfortable, but we will be following in the footsteps of our Lord.

As we soak in the message of the whole of the Bible and live in the Christian story, we have to make disciples, teaching people to believe everything that Jesus taught them.