

Sunday after Ascension 2015

1

How do stories end? *And they all lived happily ever after?* Shakespeare's comedies tend to end with a marriage or two. Conflicts resolved, misunderstandings untangled, loose ends all neatly tied up: we leave with our Humanity affirmed. By contrast Tragedies end with death – in Revenge Tragedies lots of death – all energies and conflicts spent. We leave with our fears gut-wrenchingly purged; as well as our humanity affirmed. But when we leave the theatre, we know that something about us has been transformed by our shared experience; but we have to return to our lives to discover what this means for us. The experience of reading novels may do something similar. The last line of the Lord of the Rings has Sam coming home and saying, 'Well, I'm back'. All wonderfully flat and mundane – but he is taken back into the privacy of his world and is no longer in ours for the novel has ended and there is nothing more to read; so we close the book and we too are taken back into the everyday of our lives.

How does God's story of Jesus end? It doesn't end in tragedy with the crucifixion. It doesn't end with the Resurrection. It doesn't even end with the Ascension which we celebrated on Thursday. God's story of Jesus carries on in his disciples. For how can the disciples truly learn to follow Jesus unless he isn't there with them? The gospel shows them learning how to be disciples. And they have all got great big metaphorical L plates. They are full of stories about how the disciples just don't get Jesus. So often, they're pretty clueless! They don't understand the parables and want to be told what to think despite Jesus wanting them to

work it out for themselves and own their own responses. They gawp wide-eyed when they see the Temple for the first time, succumbing to its power despite everything Jesus has taught them about power and poverty. Jesus tells them to love one another: but they bicker and fall out. Jesus challenges them to be servants or slaves of God. James and John want to sit on either side of Jesus in his glory, first in the Kingdom of God. Judas, when he tries to take control of events just can't cope when it spins so far out of control, cannot cope with the consequences of his actions, can't cope with remorse, with himself. Peter thinks courage and passion will be enough when the going gets tough. And then he has to face the truth about himself that it isn't. All of them fail when they are put the test – apart from the women who stay to the bitter end.

The sad truth is they all need Jesus to go in order for the penny to drop. They start to understand when he is no longer there. And this is such a fantastically human character trait. It's more than appreciating what people really mean to us after they are gone. This kind of change is a necessary part of being alive.

Jesus has been discipling them for years. Now they – and we – must put what Jesus has taught us into practice, must live it for ourselves without the security of being able to go back to Jesus and get his approval or help. The stabilisers are taken off the bike. The child says goodbye at the school gate and walks into school. Sons and daughters leave home. Fledglings leave the nest to make their own way in the world, to make their own mistakes. Jesus ascends and leaves us so that we may grow to the full stature of faith, we may allow the love of God to flood over our

defences and transform us, and keep on affirming and challenging and sustaining us.

The story of Jesus doesn't end. With the Ascension it was only just beginning. It just took a spark for the tinder of the disciples' faith to burst into life. But that's a story for another week.

Edited from opening paragraph:

[We find the same sort of thing going on at the end of Paradise Lost, after Adam and Eve have been banished from the Garden of Eden, the world opens up for them: Milton writes:

*Some natural tears they dropt, but wiped them soon;
The world was all before them, where to choose
Their place of rest, and Providence their guide:
They, hand in hand, with wandering steps and slow,
Through Eden took their solitary way.*

John Milton Paradise Lost Book 12: 645-649]

