

16 January 2011 – Epiphany 2A
Isaiah 49:1-7; John 1:29-42

In my first year at university, Anzac Day must have fallen on a Friday, which gave us a long weekend at the end of April. A couple of friends asked me if I'd like to join them on a trip to Queenstown, along with the boyfriend of one of them, who had a car. It was a great trip – and the first time I realised that my very thin Auckland socks were going to be completely inadequate for a southern winter. I spent much of the time having incredibly cold feet!

But it was also the first time I had traveled somewhere with photographers. (I've had a lot more experience at that since then!) Cathy and her boyfriend each had their cameras with them, and they sat in the front seats of the two-door car. Barb and I had the back seat, and happily watched the changing scenery from there. But once we got up to Central, resplendent in autumn colour, our journey slowed rapidly with frequent photographic stops.

One or other of the photographers would see something they liked, and then the car pulled over, and they both leapt out, camera in hand, and stood composing the shot they wanted. Then back into the car – and as we started driving again, they would proceed to tell each other what they had seen, what shot they'd taken, on what stop or shutter speed or aperture or..... I learnt a lot of new words that weekend!

Have you noticed how much we enjoy talking about shared experiences with others who've been there? Whether it's rehashing the big match, with the highlights and the low points, and all the 'what might have beens', or looking at holiday photos with the back stories that go with each image – the food we ate or the sights we saw or the place we stayed, or telling stories from our family history when brothers and sisters who don't see each other all that often get together – “what about the time when you?: No, that wasn't me, that was.....”

Telling a story is a way of experiencing it again, and telling our story to someone else is a way that we can include others in the experience, invite them to become part of the story with us.

There is a lot of story-telling in today's readings. Stories that have a big impact on a number of people. Stories that have the effect of changing people's lives.

Let's begin with John the Baptist. He has a number of stories to tell to anyone who would listen. First there's the one that sounds like a riddle - “After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.” Conundrums and puzzles can be very effective ways of piquing people's interest, of getting them to pay attention to the story you are telling. John seemed like someone pretty important. People were flocking to him from Jerusalem and all over the Jordan and beyond. There were plenty of stories going round about him, about what he wore and what he ate and what he said. The powers-that-be in Jerusalem sent people down to the Jordan just so that they could check out all the stories that were going round about John. “Who are you – Elijah, a prophet – or even the Messiah?” So when he tells a story he about someone who comes after him but who ranks ahead of him – that gets people's attention.

John was quite clear about who he was , and who he was not, and about the one who would come after him – but he didn't know who that one would be. What he did know was that he would recognise him when he saw him, and when he saw the sign, the Holy Spirit coming down from heaven like a dove and remaining on him, he immediately started to tell those around him, his own disciples, the new story of what he now knew.

John declares, he testifies, he exclaims – he keeps on telling his story, reliving the experience, that moment of recognition when everything that he had been doing came to fruition, the moment when the task he had been given, to prepare the way, was fulfilled.

No wonder John wanted to keep on telling people about it. This was the reason for all that he had been doing, the reason for all the stories he had been telling people, so that the one God was sending would be revealed to Israel. And here he was - "Behold the Lamb of God"

And so the story keeps on being told. Andrew and his mate follow Jesus, intrigued by John's story. Soon they have their own story to tell, because Jesus turns and sees them and asks them, "What are you looking for?"

They ask him 'Where are you staying?' - or it could be "where are you remaining?" (like the Spirit remaining on Jesus in John's story) or "Where are you abiding?" - and we know that the night before he dies Jesus will say to these same disciples, 'Abide in me as I abide in you'.

But for now Jesus answers their question - "Where are you staying?" with an invitation - "Come and see" - and they go and remain with him, stay with him, abide with him all day.

And now they have a story of their own to tell - and soon Andrew goes off to find his brother Simon and tells him, "We have found the Messiah!" and brings Simon to Jesus. Then Jesus, in a sense, re-tells Simon's story, as he says to him "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas/Peter/Rocky." A new name marks a new identity, a new way of being in the world, a new story. Simon Peter now has his own story to tell, and he keeps on telling it, not always perfectly, not always getting it right, but even when he stumbles and fails to live up to his name, he finds that the one who named him will not give up on him.

God's servant in Isaiah 49 has a story rather like Peter's to tell. This is the second Servant Song of Isaiah - last week we heard the first one, when God declares "This is my servant, whom I love, my chosen, in whom I delight". But being called and appointed and commissioned by God clearly doesn't guarantee that all will be easy - today we hear the servant's lament: "God called me and prepared me all right, but it hasn't really worked out - I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity." The task God had given the servant was to establish justice, and to bring back the people of God, but it seems that no one was listening to the servant's story, and nothing was happening. God had said "you are my servant Israel, in whom I will be glorified", but Israel was in exile in Babylon, and those left in the land were barely surviving, threatened by neighbours. Where was the glory, where was the success of God's commission?

God's response to the servant's lament is not to give up on the servant and on the call but to reaffirm and expand the call God has given him. The servant is honoured in God's sight, and God becomes his strength - his own strength has failed, he has laboured in vain, but God remains committed to the call placed on the servant, and to God's great purposes not just for Israel, but for all the nations. "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel - I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." And suddenly the servant has a new story to tell, and if you read further on in Ch.49 you hear of the work of restoration and return that God would accomplish.

The servant in Isaiah had a story to tell.

John the Baptist had stories to tell.

Andrew and then Simon Peter had stories to tell - stories of their encounters with God, and with the one sent from God, the one who invited them to come and see.

What about us? Do we also have a story to tell? How is our story-telling going?

Do we have a story to tell of the way we have met God in our lives, or the way we recognise God at work in the world around us?

Is there a story that someone has shared with us, inviting us to follow the one whom they have met and recognised and trusted?

Do we have a story we can tell together, reliving the experience, sharing the excitement, encouraging one another?

I heard a story this week.

I know a woman facing great tragedy in her life. On New Year's Eve she meant to go to bed early, but as

the night wore on she realised she wasn't going to get to sleep, so decided she might as well come into town and see the fireworks. It was almost 11 o'clock when she arrived, and drove round Moray Place, wondering where she would find a park. They were all full – until she spotted one just opposite the AA. Getting out of the car, she saw First Church, of course, a building she had never been into. But there were some lights on, and since it was a while till the fireworks, she thought she'd see if she could have a look inside. So she did, just on 11.00, and she found that people had gathered for the WatchNight service. And she stayed, and heard a story of light shining in darkness, and of hope for the coming year, and of the promise of God that whatever happens, God is with us, God loves us. And that was what she needed to hear, although she had not realised it at the time.

Was it coincidence?

I see it as God-incidence, and I claim it as a sign of God at work in the world and the life I live in. It's a story I have to tell this week.

What story might you tell?