**How can we inspire people with the story of Jesus? Revd Dr Calvin Samuel**

How do we tell the story of Jesus in our leading of worship? And crucially, how do we tell that story in ways that inspire others? Because Jesus was nothing if he was not inspirational. People left their livelihoods to follow him, people flocked to hear him, people were willing to risk their lives for him. So I confess I do get quite worked up when I hear worship that is flat or uninspiring, because the person of Jesus is anything but.

So how do we tell that story; how do we share that with others in ways that are inspiring? One of the key words there is the question of story, the word ‘story.’ Jesus was a master storyteller. And stories have great power. They have power to draw us in, power to keep our interest, and power to enable us to work towards our own resolution – particularly open-ended stories. And so some of the ways in which we want to tell the story of Jesus is precisely by using story. The story of our experience of God. Stories of the ways in which people have wrestled with big questions of our day. Stories of the ways in which the work of the church and our engagement with the world continue to shape the ways in which we operate. So stories is one way forward.

But I think, second, is around passion and personality. Let’s start with the latter of those – personality. We are who we are. One of the wonderful things about the story of Jesus is that Jesus drew to him a motley bunch of people. These were not necessarily the ‘crème de la crème’ amongst his disciples. His disciples included a tax-collector who would have been universally despised. His disciples included fisherman. His disciples included at least one zealot, and so on. So a really interesting group of people. They were who they were and they offered themselves to Christ. You are who you are. Don’t try to be someone else – and you bring that person; that personality; that engagement with Jesus, because what you’re wanting to ask is, how does this story speak to me? Because if what we are sharing with folk in worship is not something which has already moved us, something that has sparked our interest – something that we think is beautiful or insightful or, sometimes, mind-boggling, then we shouldn’t expect anyone to be moved by it if we’re not moved by it ourselves. And so who we are becomes really quite important.

But I talked about passion, and for me one of the really significant ways of sharing the story is with a certain amount of passion. Now, I’m not suggesting that you need to drum this up, that you need to be banging on a pulpit or anything like that. But what I am saying is, this should matter. I used to live in Durham, and one of the really key questions that I got asked when I moved there was simply two words: is it going to be Newcastle, or Sunderland? In other words which team mattered immensely – whether you were a Newcastle or a Sunderland supporter. What I wasn’t prepared for – and by the way I hope you know it is I’m telling you a story right now – what I wasn’t prepared for was moving back to London and being asked precisely that question because the first person I’d met was someone from Gateshead, who asked: “you lived in Durham – was it Newcastle or Sunderland?” I gave the wrong answer. These things mattered to them; Jesus matters to us. And so we shouldn’t be apologetic about being passionate, because there’s a great deal about which to be passionate.

So we should be engaging with this story, because it’s a story that’s about big things. It’s a story about life, it’s a story about death, it’s a story about triumph in the face of adversity. A story about love. And it’s a great story. And so there are so many things there to be told. One of the wonderful things about the story of Jesus is how much humour there is in it. So when Jesus says things like, “before you try to take the speck out of your neighbour’s eye, perhaps you should remove the great whacking log that’s in your own.” I think that’s probably meant to be understood with a bit of humour. And so some of what we need to say is seeing what’s going on in this story and sharing it with humour. But of course, there’s also anger. The Jesus who was able to overturn the tables of moneychangers and fashion a whip and to drive them out, is a Jesus who is profoundly angry. There are things in our world that should jolly well make us angry. Particularly when we look at them through the lens of the gospels. Some things are to do with the exploitation of the poor – it’s to do with abuse of power. There is space for righteous anger, for righteous indignation. My point is the gospel story which we are wanting to share is not one which is sanitised, which is devoid of emotion, but one that is precisely the opposite. There is anger, there is love, there is joy, and there is laughter. And some of those elements should be there too.

But I want to finish by saying three things that I think are really important as we share this story.

One, you need to immerse yourself in it – to know the gospels, to read them, to listen to them on their terms. Quite often we come to the Bible and we really want the Bible to answer questions that we have brought to it. But in fact the Bible wants to tell us what it wants to tell us, and so part of our challenge is immersing ourselves in the Bible so that we know its stories and we have something to share from it. So the first is immersion.

The second is asking the ‘so what?’ questions. So as you are reading these stories, as you are engaging with the Bible – you might want to ask, ‘so what?’ Jesus tells the story of a tower falling on people – it’s a terrible story, and you want to ask, okay so what’s going on here. Why is that story being told? What are we supposed to do with that? And the gospel writers who make their selections of stories to include, for example, pay taxes to Caesar – should you? [This} is the question that Jesus was asked. He says, give to Caesar what’s Caesar’s and give to God’s what’s God’s – and you’re asking, and what am I supposed to do with that? How does this work? The so what? Question is really, really quite important. Because I want to suggest to you the gospel writers are skilful portrait-painters. They have chosen what to include, therefore that is a question that will always illicit a useful answer.

But I think the third question is, what do we do with this now? Because we don’t live in the first century. We don’t live in Palestine. Most people who are Christian are not Jewish. And so there is quite a bit of distance from the events recorded in these gospels. So what do we do with this now? How do we translate some of the elements of those stories to our own context? Because if we’re not doing that kind of work with our Scriptures, then they remain historically bound. They are wonderful things to tell us a little bit about life as it used to be. But the kinds of questions that we’re interested in are questions that are driving us now.

Now that may sound a little bit like a contradiction, because earlier I said, “immerse yourself in the Bible.” Quite often we come to the Bible seeking to find questions that the Bible isn’t willing to discuss. And that’s absolutely true. But that’s not to suggest for a moment that our reading of Scripture, and our engaging with the story of Jesus should not be intersecting in multiple ways with our contemporary situation, and one of the reasons for this is: human nature has not changed fundamentally. So whether you’re looking at human beings two thousand years ago, or indeed human beings a thousand years from now – the same kinds of issues are still going to be there. We’re still going to be people inclined to selfishness, we’re still going to be people who are disinclined to truthfulness when it’s not in our best interests. We’re still shaped by fear or greed, and so on. And so some of the elements in these stories are utterly timeless, simply because human beings are human beings. We have the same failings and we have the same opportunity for greatness. And so what we’re trying to do as we tell this story – we are trying to find points of connection between the people who we encounter with those stories, and the people that we encounter in our everyday life.

Above all, our encounters and our story-telling needs to be fresh. There’s nothing worse than a story you’ve heard multiple times, unless of course it happens to be a brilliant story. But if you already know the punchline, you already know where it’s going to go – you can shut down. But trying to keep our stories fresh, and we do this by going back to Scripture, being immersed, and then making the connections. And part of that, if you like, fresh storytelling is giving ourselves permission to be creative. If you’ve ever been in a service – particularly one where you’re not leading – I mean bored – it tells you something about someone perhaps not being as creative as they could have been. If you’ve been leading the service and you’ve been bored, then you probably need to have a little talk with yourself about your lack of creativity. But being creative, it seems to me, is one of the things that we see in Jesus. When asked a question, quite often his answers were highly creative. Either by using some sort of parable, or by seeing through the question that was being asked to the intent, and engaging with that. Jesus, for example, when he was presented with a woman caught in adultery, what does he do? He knows what the law says. The law is very clear – there was a death penalty at the time for adultery. Jesus, interestingly, doesn’t do anything very much. He says, ‘yup, she is guilty – you know what the law says.’ And then he says, ‘let the one who is without sin be the first person to cast the stone.’ And then he doodles on the ground – doesn’t engage, doesn’t look at anyone, just de-escalates the situation. And one by one those who accuse this woman left, because they recognise, okay, she might be guilty, but we are no freer from sin than she is. After some time he happens to notice, it appears, that no one else is there. And then he asks that wonderful question, “where are those who accuse you? No one’s here to accuse you, neither do I – go and sin no more.” That for me is a wonderfully creative response. Jesus doesn’t enter into a debate about the merits of the case. He doesn’t ask the obvious question as to where the other party is in this adulterous accusation. He deals with this creatively, he says, ‘yes, she’s guilty – it’s a very high-risk stake – but if you’re not guilty yourself then feel free to proceed.

So we tell this story of Jesus with creativity, we tell this story of Jesus with passion, we inject something of our personality – we are who we are as we engage with this story. But I want finally to say, we tell this story of Jesus as though it matters. Because I think it matters profoundly. For Christians, the person of Jesus is the person on whom our faith is founded. No Jesus, no Christianity. It’s – the clue is in our title as Christians. Christian faith is rooted in a number of things, one of them being the idea of incarnation – that God came to us in the person of Christ, took on humanity, our humanity, became one of us, and then lived as we should live, demonstrating to us what redeemed humanity should look like, but also demonstrating that by the power of the Spirit this is possible. That’s that story of redemption. God who becomes what we are to enable us to become what he is. I think that matters tremendously, because it is a way of saying the world as it is does not need to continue to be the way that it is – that people who are broken, who are lost in sin, people who are not quite what they should be, have the capacity to be so much more through Christ, and that the world can be transformed. That’s what we’re trying to tell people.

Now, I know that for many of us, we don’t really believe that what we have to say is all that significant. We don’t really think it is world-changing. And here’s the thing: you’re probably right. But I want to finish by reminding you of one of my favourite stories from the gospels. It’s the story of the feeding of the five thousand, which is this wonderful miracle of Jesus feeding this large number of people from this small boy who offers five loaves, two fish. What I like about that story is the irony in it. The irony is that they have found the disciples; they have found this boy with this small offering, and they bring it to Jesus, saying almost apologetically, saying, ‘Lord, we have this – but clearly it’s not enough.’ It’s such a small offering. And so often when we try to tell the story of Jesus, we feel a little apologetic about our small offering – we think, ‘here’s my little thoughts – here’s my little work. What is that going to do?’ But the same God who’s able to take that small offering of five loaves and two fish and to multiply it for his purposes, is able to take our engagement and to multiply it for his purposes too.

So dig deep, engage with the person of Jesus; fall in love with Jesus again. Wrestle with the texts. Immerse yourself in them – offer your passion, your personality, and then offer that to God and let’s see what happens. Tell the story, because it’s a wonderful story of Christ.