

HAVE I GOT NEWS FOR YOU

It is Pantomime time so let's think about the story of Jack and the Beanstalk. Jack and his widowed mother are desperately poor. They have no food and no money. They have sold nearly everything that can be sold and their only remaining asset is the cow. Jack's mother tells him to take the cow to market and be sure to get a good price for her. He sets off and meets a man who offers him a handful of beans in exchange for the cow. A handful of beans? Ah, but these are magic beans, says the stranger. Jack hands over the cow, pockets the beans and makes his way home. His mother, surprisingly, is less than happy with this bargain of a lifetime. She throws the beans out of the window, boxes Jack's ears and both of them go to bed sobbing with hunger. The night is dark and long. Jack and his mother are at rock bottom. As they see it, life has failed them and they have failed each other.

They are looking at their situation quite realistically. It is absolutely true that they have no money, no food and no prospect of either. What they do not see, of course, is that outside the window, in the darkness, the magic beans are starting to grow. Something is happening around them which they had not bargained for. In the morning, when Jack wakes up, a giant beanstalk has grown and if he can only summon up the courage to climb it and confront whatever challenges await, his life will be transformed and he will be changed.

What you see in front of you is not always the whole or even the most important part of the story.

The television programme-Have I got news for you- is officially a quiz programme, where the contestants answer questions on what has been going on in the world recently. In actual fact, it is a mickey-take from beginning to end. The panel poke fun at the news; they make sarcastic comments about the people in the headlines; they invent hilarious new captions for newspaper photographs; they refuse to take world events too seriously. It is meant to be a laugh and it is funny-well, I think it is- but it is also showing that there is more than one way of seeing things. The contestants are looking at the news from a different angle and some of their comments reveal what is really going on at the back of the world stage while attention is focussed on the front. They can tear "official statements" to pieces. They can pull out the hidden agenda in politics and celebrity. After all humour, at its best, is about getting things in proportion and so even through this satirical quiz programme we are able to see that Gordon Brown and George Bush and Osama Bin Laden do not necessarily have the last word on what is actually going on in the world today. What you see is not always the whole or even the most important part of the story.

Which brings us to Luke's Gospel, chapter three: the story of John the Baptist. Luke starts off by listing the key figures at the front of the world stage. Tiberius Caesar, the Roman Emperor who governed most of the known world; Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor who had been given charge of Judea-where John and Jesus lived; Kings Herod, Phillip and Lysannias who were allowed limited power over their own people; Annas and Caiaphas who were in charge of religion. These men were the "big noises." Theirs were the names everybody knew. Luke is giving a perfectly accurate description of the political situation in his country at that time.

But then he quickly refocuses his story on what is going on at the back of the stage. In one of the more obscure regions of the Roman Empire, John the Baptist, a somewhat eccentric preacher, is trying to say something. Nobody important is taking any notice

foreign lands; there will be fighting and wounding and killing; there will be desolation and despair in the hearts of the people. Isaiah knew this perfectly well. So why come out with this poetic promise of water in the desert and singing in the streets? Was he deluded or was he just paid well to pedal religious propaganda?

You know, it may be neither. It could be that what Isaiah was talking about was not what was going on at the front of the stage but what was going on at the back. Not what was happening in his people's outward circumstances but what was going on inside them.

At the forefront of world history was the encroaching power of the Assyrian Empire which was taking over the nation who had once believed itself favoured by God and was now in ruins. But at the back of the stage was what Isaiah called "the faithful remnant" or "the green shoot from the fallen tree." For some of his people this time of crisis was showing them what was really important in life. For the first time they could see clearly what was good and what was bad. They could witness the battle between the power of God and the forces of evil. And they were finding that they could meet with God himself rather than simply practise religion.

So, although outwardly they were suffering, they were in danger, they were losing everything; inwardly they were renewing their faith, they were grasping the truth, they were coming face to face with God. In the desert places they saw his splendour and they sang for joy.

The old kingdom had been founded for years on delusions of grandeur. Wealth and power had corrupted its leaders and dissipated its people. For the nation to be re-born, to grow truly strong, to be filled with the glory of God, the people themselves had to be re-born. What they were, in essence, had to change. And, like Jack's magic beanstalk, here was the opportunity for them to do so, even in the face of material ruin. It was this remnant who would rebuild the nation as the people of God.

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It has taken me a long time to come to terms with the fact that the way to God is not along a straight, predictable pathway: the way of getting everything right; the way of regular church-going and religious practices; the way of a privileged life, a well-protected middle-class childhood; the way of impeccable morality and clear-cut rules for living.

For most people the way to God takes them through suffering and failure; through appalling mistakes and a lot of confusion; through doubts in abundance and faith that is about as strong as a politician's promise; through loss and devastation; through hurt which is done to you and hurt you inflict upon others. As Jesus said, it is a narrow way and a painful journey.

And there is a temptation then, when you feel that you have finally come to know God, to dismiss all your past life as a mistake, a wrong-turning, something to be regretted and hopefully forgotten. "*We won't talk about that...*" Then you can concentrate on creating the right environment for God, a more appropriate set of circumstances, a higher standard of behaviour.... which is all very good until things go wrong again- another tragedy hits your life, you make another appalling mistake and then you assume that God is not there anymore. You have lost him.

It is in the desert that the path is made for God. Isaiah wrote this over and over again and, five hundred years later John the Baptist was quoting him because he knew it

was true. It is in the places of despair and desolation, the places we never intended or wished to go, the places of failure and danger that roads are built on which God comes to meet us. There are times when, at the front of the stage which is our life, everything may seem to be collapsing in ruins about us. Like Jack and his mother we stare into the darkness feeling that life has let us down and that we have let everybody down, including ourselves.

But at the back of the stage, even if we do not see it, a road is being made for God.

And to me there are two things that are vitally important about this picture.

Firstly, it is the only hope we have for the Christian church as we know it, which is falling to pieces. Just like Isaiah's nation, we are going under and the time will come when we no longer exist. We only have to look at the statistics and the age profiles of church-goers to see the truth.

It is just that maybe, maybe, the power of God is at work in places we do not always see and in ways that we do not always recognise. It is possible that deep faith and dynamic vision are growing even now in the desolate place that is a dying church.

And secondly, perhaps finding a path to God in the desert is the only way that we can see a little sense and meaning in the tragedies of human life. I am not saying that sin and suffering are deliberately inflicted upon us by God in order to drag us back on our knees in front of him.

It is just that if, even in our darkest and most devastating places, we can find the way to God, who is truth and life and love, then perhaps the universe is not a random blob or a tale told by an idiot after all. There is a loving power at the heart of life.

What you see in front of you is not always the whole or even the most important part of the story.

The man who wrote the famous hymn "Rock of Ages" also wrote these words:

*Inspirer and hearer of prayer.
Great shepherd and guardian of thine
My all to thy covenant care
My sleeping and waking resign.
If thou art my shield and my sun
The night is no darkness to me
And fast as my moments roll on
They bring me but nearer to thee.*