

LP

Readers' Service

'God's Never Ending Story'

by

Paul Johns

Number: 67

Local Preachers' Office
Methodist Church House
25 Marylebone Road
LONDON
NW1 5JR

ORDER OF SERVICE

'GOD'S NEVER ENDING STORY'

CALL TO WORSHIP

HYMN (H&P) 109: Let earth and heaven combine

PRAYERS OF PRAISE AND THANKSGIVING:

'Unsearchable the love that has the Saviour brought.'

O Lord of all creation and of every human heart, we come before you to wonder at the God we know and do not know. In so many ways, and supremely in Jesus Christ, you have done so much and will do so much more. You never change, yet you are always doing new things.

Let nothing stand in the way of our praising you. If we are pleased with ourselves - remind us who made us. If we are downhearted about ourselves - remind us who forgives us. If we are anxious - help us to remember who said 'Let not your heart be troubled.' If we fear for the future - tell us that it is you who write the end of the story, and you are a loving God.

So let us come to you with our praise and thanks for all good, beautiful and comforting things; for beauty of countryside and garden; for family, friends and fellowship; but above all else we thank you for the never ending story of your love.

We thank you for the great tale of our salvation; for the way in which you keep appearing in your own story as Father, giver of life; as Son, our example, redeemer; as Spirit, the companion of our days. You judge, you forgive, you heal, you transform. And one day, you will make the world and all things in it new; and life will be as life is meant to be.

Draw us together around you as we worship you now. Make us feel your presence as we listen to your story for us today.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION:

For we are not good listeners, Lord. Often we are distracted. We are not good at gathering round you. We are too inclined, like toddlers, to get up and wander off. And our wanderings are not always innocent. We abuse the freedom you give us. We are capable of going against your will, and often we do.

For we are part of a community which too easily abuses the gifts you have given us - the natural world, our natural instincts. We bring trouble on each other, trouble on ourselves. We deface your divine image within us, scrawling our own selfishness all over your generosity.

In silence we reflect on our own wrongdoing, and the wrongdoing of the world around us.

And now, in the silence, we hear the sound of your forgiveness. Our sins are forgiven. Amen. Thanks be to God.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

HYMN (H&P) 720: Son of God, if thy free grace (v.3 may be omitted)

READINGS: Jeremiah Chapter 1:4-9 and Chapter 31:31-34

HYMN (H&P) 447: Deep in the shadows of the past (preferred tune 106)

READINGS: Acts Chapter 9:1-11, 17 and 19 and John Chapter 21:15-19

SERMON (see attached sheets)

HYMN (H&P) 64: God has spoken by his prophets

PRAYER OF INTERCESSION:

Lord God we lay before you the needs of our world and those around us, near and far. We know that your purpose exceeds our understanding, and your compassion outstretches our concern.

We hear so many stories – big ones and little ones, simple ones and complicated ones, happy one and sad ones. We rejoice in your great story of salvation, which embraces all others.

*Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.***

We pray for people whose lives are stories of war, of poverty, of injustice; stories without hope, without satisfactory endings in sight.

*Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.***

We pray for those whose stories are tales of greedy ambition, the pursuit of power, of crime, cruelty and neglect.

*Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.***

We pray for those whose stories are about pain, loneliness, grief, anxiety; broken homes, lost opportunities, of love grown cold.

*Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.***

We pray for those whose lives are stories of faithful endeavour, patience, daily caring, and the persistent pursuit of peace in things great and small.

*Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.***

*We pray for our church and circuit, leaders and members, as we seek to find our place in your story, and to become, in word and deed, your storytellers.
Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.*

O Lord, accept these prayers in the name of Christ Jesus who taught us how to pray. We are not good prayer pupils, but we believe that you will weave our petitions into the tapestry of your loving purpose, and help us to act on what we pray. Amen.

OFFERING AND DEDICATION: (Southwell Diocesan Prayer – slightly modified)

May God's spirit send us out into the world to discover the riches of Christ in the poor, the sick and the stranger; to share the treasures of Christ with those at work, with friends and family; to restore the glory of Christ to his earth, and to join hands with all who work for peace and justice. Let us help to make this world resound with the story of God's loving purpose, that, even in suffering and death, we may all come to rest in the living hope we find in Christ Jesus. Amen.

HYMN (H&P) 698: Let him to whom we now belong

BLESSING: (Northumbrian Community prayer)

May the peace of the Lord Jesus Christ go with you/us wherever he may send you/us. May he guide you/us through the wilderness, protect you/us through the storm. May he bring you/us home rejoicing at the wonders he has shown you/us. May he bring you/us home rejoicing once again unto our doors.

THE GRACE

SERMON

'THE NEVER ENDING STORY'

There's a film on video. It's a story called *'The Never Ending Story.'*

It's about a young boy. He is grieving the death of his mother. He is not doing well at school. Other boys sense his vulnerability. Boys can be cruel. They bully him. He is sad.

Then he finds a story book in a bookshop - a very special book. It's called *'The Never Ending Story.'* It's about a wonderful country called *'Fantasia.'* But *'Fantasia'* is in danger of being destroyed by a terrible relentless force called *'Nothing.'*

As he reads the story, the boy *'enters into'* the story. He enters into it to such an extent that he becomes part of it. The people of *'Fantasia'* call him to rescue them from *'Nothing.'*

He does great things. He has to make his way alone through the Swamp of Sadness, which is clearly a metaphor for his own grief. He outfaces a great tortoise which could help him but won't because, it says, *'nothing matters anymore.'* He has to face a mirror which makes him see himself as he really is. All this takes courage.

But the boy rescues *'Fantasia'* from *'Nothing.'* And as he does so, he himself is rescued from the sadness, the emptiness, the nothingness of his own life. He is transformed. He sees himself in a new way. His life, at home, at school, becomes worth living again.

He enters the story. He plays an important part in it. And in so doing he himself is changed.

Jeremiah

We heard just now about Jeremiah. He lived in times of catastrophe for his country, his people.

He lived to see the city of Jerusalem destroyed by the army of Babylon. He saw the destruction of the Temple - God's dwelling place on earth. He saw the people of Judah taken into captivity in exile.

It was as though God's chosen people were becoming nothing - not just in a political sense, but in a spiritual sense too.

But Jeremiah was called by God to be a prophet, to enter the story. And he changed things. He did not prevent the fall of Jerusalem or its temple. His words did not set the people free and bring them home from Babylon.

But he showed that these events - the fall of Jerusalem and the exile - were not signs of nothing. Rather they were part of God's purpose to rescue people from nothing.

These terrible events were the darkness before a new dawn, the necessary condition for a fresh start, a new covenant between God and people, based on a religion of the heart.

And as he entered God's story as God's prophet, Jeremiah himself was changed. A reluctant country boy became a man full of moral courage, to withstand derision and threats to his life. He became one of the greatest prophets, with a very special insight into the way God works his purpose out through crisis.

Paul

We heard just now about Paul. Paul lived in a world dominated by Greek culture.

Mostly people believed life was governed by forces beyond our control, like the stars or spirits, or capricious gods. The world could not be changed for the better. The best thing

a person could do was to cultivate his or her own virtue despite the world; and perhaps hope for peace in an immortal soul. This was ultimately a pessimistic view of the world, pointing to nothing in the end.

This was not, of course, Paul's view. He was a Jew, a Pharisee, a member of God's chosen people. He believed in a God who would put the world right, a God with a good purpose, for his chosen people, for all who would keep his law.

But Paul had an inside problem. He worked hard at keeping the law. He was good at keeping the law. But found no personal peace with God. There was a '*Nothing*' eating away at his heart, his spirit.

No wonder he was hostile to the Christians. There they were. They challenged the Jewish story about God's chosen people. They seemed to have found a peace with God denied to Paul. They were undermining the foundations of his professional career and his personal life. Paul didn't want to enter the Christian story. He wanted to kill it off.

But on the Damascus Road, Paul was turned right around. He entered into the Christian story. He became an important part of it. He helped to shape it. He, above all others, took this Jewish story to the Gentiles. He showed that the story of Jesus was the answer to, the cure for, the pessimism, the nothingness of the Gentile world of ideas.

And he was changed too. He changed from persecuting Christians to leading them. He found the answer to his inner nothingness in the grace of God shown to him in Jesus Christ.

Peter

We heard just now about Peter.

For Peter, the enthusiastic disciple, the story of Jesus came to nothing. There was the crucifixion. And even after the resurrection, Peter felt the story had come to an end for him. For he had denied Jesus at his trial.

Then on the beach, over breakfast, Peter met the risen Christ. Jesus invited Peter back into the story. *'Do you love me?Feed my sheep.'*

Peter was glad to come back into the story of Jesus. And he helped to shape it. He preached the gospel with great courage. He was able to hold the new Christian community together when big disputes about Jews and gentiles threatened to tear it apart. He became an effective leader.

And Peter himself was changed too. A man paralysed by guilt was set free by forgiveness. A man who denied Jesus became a martyr for the faith, and died like his master.

AND US?

Jeremiah, Paul and Peter have this in common. They enter into God's story. They play an important part in it. They are changed by it.

God tells his story through the writings in the Bible. He told it through the exile of the Jews and the life of Jeremiah. He told it through the story of Jesus and his disciples, of Peter and Paul, and the early church.

But God's story did not end with the end of the Bible. God is still telling his story. And in a small way his is telling it through you and me.

Your life and mine, the life of our church and of our community, of our families and friends are all part of God's unfinished story.

God has many many words still to speak to us and through us. Let's ask God to give us ears to hear Him speaking to each one of us, today, everyday, in words and ways of his own choosing.

You may think your life as dull and uneventful. God doesn't. You may think it too strewn with failures, wasted days and missed opportunities, to be much use. God doesn't. You may think too much of it is passed and too little left for God to do great things with you. God

doesn't.

There is a special place for each one of us in His story. Ask God to help you to discover it. Ask that he will use you to change things here and there for the better; and change you for the better in doing so. Let's pray that he will help us play our part in the never ending story of his love.