

'In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit'. The opening line of Tolkien's beloved tale I am currently reading with one of our boys who have subsequently both been obsessing over the three part film production made over ten years ago. We follow Bilbo Baggins – an unlikely hero – pulled from the comfort of the Shire into danger, loss and transformation. And yet the journey is not just about dragons or gold. It is about change, sacrifice and, ultimately, homecoming...But homecoming as a different person – changed by the adventure he has been through.

Surely this is why we keep turning to stories like this and what explains their enduring appeal, whether as children or adults – Lord of the Rings beckons next for the boys...As children we long to be one of the characters. As adults we discern their flaws, their sensibilities and relate them to our own experiences of ourselves and others. Deep down we sense that our lives are also part of something larger, something with meaning. We long for a story that makes sense of our anxieties, of suffering, of courage, of sacrifice – and points us towards hope.

Stories are the bedrock of our identity. They help tell us who we are, who we are not, who we might be and where we're going. Great leaders, political and spiritual, are able not only to discern what story we believe we're a part of, but communicate where and who we are in that story. And it shows the hold and power stories have on us, that sometimes whole groups have been driven to murderous consequences when a more sinister story is crafted and articulated. The baddies are just as easily identified in Trump's vision and narrative for America as they are in any child's superhero novel.

This Palm Sunday we open the page of Holy Week - the most important week in the Christian year and climax of our Christian story. As the great Arsene Wenger once quipped on the Premier League title race – *'Christmas is important but Easter is crucial'*. Our liturgies and rituals of this week take us on a journey, calling us at each point to reflect on who and where we are.

Today we identify with those who welcomed Jesus for the first time – shouting hosanna, blessing palms and crosses, proclaiming Jesus as Lord on our streets – we are the people who were glad to see Jesus and welcomed him in. It's a joyous beginning – *'all glory, laud and honour to thee Redeemer King'*. Surely things can only get better to quote that 90s anthem.

But during the week, the plot thickens. We have to come to terms with the fact that when Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, he turns out not to be so welcome after all. And the story asks **what about us?** How do we respond when Jesus arrives **in our lives?** In the face of the person we pass who is homeless on our way to work? In the friend or loved one who's reaching out to us after an argument? Are we looking for Jesus? Are we glad to see him? Do we want to make him welcome?

We ask these questions searchingly of ourselves. Because if Holy Week is going well, then we begin to understand why Jesus can seem threatening to **our** safety and we, like the people of Jerusalem in the first holy week, don't want him around.

On Maundy Thursday we re-enact that gesture of Jesus that reveals the power of God. In the act of washing his disciples' feet, he shows himself to be literally and completely at their service – the form of a slave – kneeling in the dust. A reminder of how power is always, in Christian terms, connected with service. How can we do the same for others? Or do we need to allow others to serve us?

The best stories seem to have a scene by night or in the dark, like Gollum and Bilbo exchanging riddles in the caves. On Maundy Thursday we move into the darkness of the Watch, where we accompany Jesus in his agony in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before his death. And like the first disciples who fall asleep, betray Jesus, deny knowledge of him, desert him and run away when he's arrested, we have to realise that we're not heroes, that we're not willing, most of the time, to walk with Jesus to the Cross – we'd rather be elsewhere.

After the Eucharist that night, the altar is stripped and the Church is bare. It remains so through Good Friday. We face the most basic fact about ourselves – our need and poverty. So it's no time for flowers but bare walls, a bare table and ourselves left face to face with the Cross - *'then crucify is all their breath and for his death they thirst and cry'*. We face **in ourselves** those same motives that led people 2000 years ago to cry for Jesus' death.

But Good Friday is of course 'good'. Because despite this knowledge of ourselves we see Christ's arms open and embracing. We see on the Cross what God does for us – *'my song is love unknown, love to the loveless shown'*. We celebrate Easter Sunday with the lights fully on, candles lit, the bells are rung and we proclaim the light that has dawned upon the world. We are taken on a journey all week from the darkness of not really understanding ourselves, to seeing ourselves clearly in the light of the risen Christ.

Like all good stories (Bilbo's included), the journey of Holy Week is one that brings us home. We are brought home to the knowledge of who Jesus really is, *'no story so divine'* – risen, alive and present with us – *'in whose sweet praise, I all my days, could gladly spend'*. It is the story of ultimate consolation. In Holy Week we tell the story of which we are part, and in which we find truth, purpose and ultimately God.

As Christians we are a storied people. The story of Holy Week is the bedrock of our identity. In our re-enactment of this drama again, we are invited to find ourselves in the story, to discover who we are and who God really is – *'love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all'*.