

CHRISM Paper 7

The Kingdom of Heaven is like.....

(Parables of MSE)

Storytelling is tremendously powerful. It is one of the oldest human traditions – way back at the dawn of human history we can picture the family huddled in a cave, or the tribe around a big fire, listening to a story. Stories passed the time and were entertaining, but they were much more than that. History, culture and religion were enshrined in story, essential knowledge was passed on through story, genealogies established and remembered, old friendships and hatreds rehearsed and renewed or lamented. At the very beginning of the Bible, the first three chapters of Genesis preserve two different stories of the creation, one originating from a nomadic desert tribe (for whom the Garden of Eden would naturally be an oasis in the desert) while the other came from an agricultural people living in a fertile coastal land with rivers and ports, whose idea of Eden was an island in the sea.

Jesus was a natural storyteller. Again and again, when seeking to make a particular point, he seizes on the device of a story to illustrate his meaning. His stories are invariably built round everyday situations and experiences which would be familiar to his audience. Sometimes he uses well-known stories of the day, but adapts them to give a sting in the tail, jerking his hearers from comfortable enjoyment to consideration of something new and surprising. He signals his stories clearly: “A man was building his house...”, “A sower went out to sow his seed...”, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho...”, “A woman had ten silver coins...”, and, most directly and most frequently, “The kingdom of heaven is like...”. Sometimes he explains the story; sometimes he leaves his listeners to work the meaning out for themselves.

We who minister in secular employment find ourselves required to use the everyday language of the workplace to “see and tell the Christian story there”. We cannot hide behind the language of theology when talking to our colleagues. Story is an important tool for us too, and we find ourselves using twenty-first century examples to help us put our points across. This is a very small collection of stories compiled by CHRISM members. Its intention is to encourage you in your use of the technique. What is the kingdom of heaven like, where you are?

Do send us your own stories. The CHRISM journal will happily print them. You never know what will spark off a useful thought in someone else’s mind!

The Kingdom of Heaven is like

... the work of the Partial Exemption Team, Customs & Excise, in the North West. Partial Exemption has been modestly called the snake pit in the minefield of VAT, and we get a great deal of our work when someone – a colleague or a business – realises they have a problem. It’s known as the “oh shit!” factor, and we’re asked to help clear it up.

The first task is to identify just what the problem is. The second deciding the best way to address it. If there is a method for Partial Exemption in place already, is it “fair and reasonable” – and workable. If not, what is? Often it really is a case of saying: “Scrap that and let’s start again from scratch”.

Nor is it easy to agree on the problem and solution. It may be that someone disagrees, in which case we need to patiently and carefully go through and demonstrate why there is a problem and work together to find the best solution. Ideally, if the person who did not agree in the first place can be brought round to recognise the problem and then propose the solution we have been leading round to

The task is complete when all parties have agreed on the outcome and can make a fresh start. Until the next time that is!

A recent experience sums it up well. A colleague was on an audit to a large and very well-known company and had found that part of the Partial Exemption method could not work, as it did not fit the form of accounting system information. The colleague ‘phoned me: “Houston, we have a problem...”. A few minutes thought brought a bright idea that was both workable and within the legal framework. A telephone conference was hurriedly arranged the same afternoon. The Company Taxation Manager set out his stall and proposed that we allow something that we could not – and was quite sure there was no other solution. Rather than get into a debate, a quick change of tack to “If the problem is what if we were to do this:” and the pennies could be heard dropping at the other end. Salvation may come in some strange forms but come it will.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like...

...a chemical factory, which takes in a lot of chemicals and raw materials:

- some of them are dropped onto the floor or spilt on the ground and are lost down the drains, flow into the river and into the environment;
- some of them are get burned in accidental fires and cause explosions, injury and death, and large clouds of black smoke;
- some get breathed by the workers in the factory and lead to long-term health problems;
- but some of these chemicals are used to make products which are useful to the customers – to you and to me. They create more jobs, give support to the local neighbourhood, develop the local economy, and create an income for the shareholders and for pensioners.

The best factory I ever worked in...

(or, to put it another way, the kingdom of heaven) is like a business which decided to adopt Total Quality Management. A new Managing Director came into the business and trained up some of the people to help others work in groups to identify problems and sort out problems. They worked together and formed other groups and solved even more problems.

But then there came a change in the financial climate and the business could no longer compete with the right quality material. So the business closed and everyone was made redundant.

But such was the culture of teamwork that all the staff worked together – they brought in job adverts from the papers, they told the others where they found a job opening – and so they helped each other find new jobs.

And the day production stopped, everyone - from shop floor operators to the Directors - went out for a great feast in the pub, and stayed there for an eternity – well, at least until long after closing time.

There was once a row of trees.

Somebody planted them about eighty years ago; they had reached a great size. Woodpeckers visited regularly, starlings nested in holes, squirrels built drays, pigeons, jays and magpies sunbathed in the huge branches. In early summer seeds drifted, white, gossamer light, down the gentle breeze to cover the ground. On every strong wind their countless leaves made the sound of water on a gravel beach. Winter snow outlined trunks and boughs in magical shapes against the frost blue sky.

People began to notice. They liked the tree screen for their houses, admired the seasonal colours and watched the wildlife round the year. They enjoyed the soothing seaside sound, and wondered at the prolific silence of countless seeds. Tree Officers discovered, recorded, and named the trees “Black Poplars”. They were noted in national surveys.

More people came, and built houses on the other side of the trees, and too close. At first those who lived in the new houses also liked the screen, and the burbling, rippling, soothing sound of the trees. But soon, in their much restricted space, the trees needed care. Sadly the new people did not know their name, their rarity, or how to care. People became fearful of the size of the trees; insurers warned of the risks; money was short; Tree Officers were over-worked; Preservation Orders were not made.

One day, in just one day, the slow, beautiful work of eighty years was gone at the hands of three men with chain saws. There was now only silence in the summer wind; the birds and animals were confused; everywhere was a vast hole in the sky! Soon those who had felled the trees disliked the view of brick and plastic houses. The new people had no screening from the “ children’s playgrounds” of their neighbours’ gardens. The buyers of houses searched for greener places to live.

Do we plant or take down? Do we speak with our neighbours of our shared involvement with the world of trees, plants, animals, and other creatures? If we fail to talk of our shared back-gardens what will happen when really big challenges come?

Once upon a time there was a very large company.

Once upon a time - because all the best stories start that way - once upon a time there was a very large company which did business with many other very large companies. One piece of business was not going well. The customer staff were uncooperative, uncertain about their requirements but extremely critical of the work that was done for them. This made for a very difficult atmosphere. But the people who worked on this business had been together for four or five years, and an excellent team spirit had grown up, partly driven by the awkward environment they worked in. They coped with changing requirements and worked long hours to meet deadlines. They developed a strong loyalty to each other and an almost bloody-minded determination to deliver the goods despite all the hurdles the customer put in their way. Perhaps surprisingly, staff turn-over was much lower than average.

Then, quite unexpectedly, the customer cancelled a large part of the contract. Suddenly there was no more work for people to do, and no need for the team itself any more. It really felt as though there were to be no results from all the hard work they had done - it would all be wasted. Morale went to rock-bottom in half an hour, and people started polishing their CVs.

The team leaders took the decision not to make anyone redundant, and set about finding new jobs for everyone. Over the next few weeks, people got training - in some cases the first they'd had for several years. They were redeployed to different parts of the company and found themselves working on other business in new teams, often using more up-to-date technology. Some took on new responsibilities; others drew on prior experience to help in dealing with other difficult situations.

The old team met up in the pub six months later. After quite a large number of pints, they came to the conclusion that losing that business had been a good thing - for the company, as well as for themselves.