

A better story

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[0:00] As part of it, how Thomas Cromwell uses stories to make his point to get his way. and this is a quote from the book some of these things are true and some of them are lies but they're all good stories.

think about that a bit later. here's another quote this is from question author Glyn Harrison wrote a book called a better story title I've shamelessly plagiarized from my own sermon here.

The better story Glyn Harrison is talking about actually is that Christians should have a better story on human sexuality. And the book is well worth reading because the principle is even greater than that.

So it's worth quoting what he says in his book. says you can't respond to a great story with a list of facts. Well you can of course but hardly anybody will listen.

If you want to win hearts as well as minds you need to tell a better story. Here's a quote for of course from this New Testament.

[1:18] Jesus well understood the power of story and we'll think a bit about this later. Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables. He did not say anything to them without using a parable.

So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet. I will open my mouth in parables. I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world.

Stories are important. We were reading a story this morning weren't we just now that David read the story of Ezekiel. Because there are different kinds of stories.

Some stories and we call them histories depend for their force in getting as close as words can get to the literal truth. And this is what Luke is aiming at in his account because he makes this clear in the opening chapter of Acts.

He's just going to tell you facts here. All these facts are true. And you have to think about them and make them what you will as it were. On the other extreme some stories are parables or fables or fiction.

[2:39] Parables tend to be short stories which embody a sort of metaphor. Fables may have a more extended metaphor and some are fiction. Which try to tell you something about the world as it is.

By making up a story about it. But they're made up stories of course. Whether these fictional stories exist in the Bible is debated.

But personally I think the Song of Solomon is a work of fiction. But let's not go there and get hung up on that. But then there are some stories.

Which are sort of dramatized histories. And Wolf Hall is of that type in fact. We know that not everything in it is actually historical fact.

It's not supposed to be. But it's to try and make us understand what was historical fact. By sort of filling out the details.

[3:47] And expressing it in a dramatic form. And certainly that form of story exists in the scripture as well. We find it for instance in the book of Job. Job is written in poetry.

And the book of Job has a prologue and an epilogue. It has all the structure of a dramatized work. Most people think that. At least most conservative scholars let me say.

Not most people probably. Most conservative scholars think that Job probably was a real person. And that it's telling us a story about Job. But it is dramatized.

It makes no claim otherwise. It's all written in poetry. And real life doesn't happen in poetry. But there going back to that Wolf Hall quote.

Which said some of these were true and some were lies. There's that most dangerous sort of story. The story that's a subtly blended mixture of truth and lie.

[4:52] And which therefore twists the truth into a falsehood. Those are the most dangerous sort of stories. And as Paul says in this passage.

The devil in our passage. In our passage of course is represented by the. The. Elemas. Is particularly good at these. That's what Paul says isn't it.

Says you are a child of the devil. And an enemy of everything that is right. You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord.

Right back in the garden. The serpent. Tells a story which is. A careful blend of truth and lie. In fact. It's arguable that everything the serpent says in the garden of Eden.

Is actually true in a sense. And yet they're. Distorted into lies. The devil can quote scripture. We know that. He does when. Jesus was in the desert.

[5:56] The devil quotes scripture at him. The devil is perfectly capable. And humans are perfectly capable. Of constructing a story.

Which is a subtle blend of. Truth and lie. It also matters. Doesn't it.

How you tell the story. If there was a sort of. One of these impartial alien observers. Hovering over Washington. A few weeks ago.

At the US election. And if this observer. Was. Studying the media reports. And the polls. They would surely have thought. The result of the election.

Was a foregone conclusion. On the one hand. We have a convicted felon. Who even his supporters. Admit is not a particularly nice guy.

[6:52] How could he possibly. Win over. A woman who comes over. As a pleasant caring. Sort of lady. Or how can the self-proclaimed.

Liberal progressives. The forces of diversity. And inclusion. Those who. According to all the media. On the right side of history. How could they possibly.

Lose against the forces. Of intolerance. And reaction. As they obviously saw it. How did the Democrats. Lose the American elections.

Good question. They claim it. Perhaps it was misogyny. Or racism. But the statistics. Don't bear that out. Trump actually. Increased his share.

Of the vote. Among women. And among black men. At least. Not necessarily black women. But black men. And Latinos. Who the. Democrats.

[7:46] Hardly bothered to woo. Because they assumed. They would all vote. Vote for them. But they didn't. Actually. Most of the. Commentators. And pundits. Whatever their own.

Political opinion is. Are fairly. Much in agreement. About what. Went wrong. The Democrats. Lost control. Of the narrative. They were so convinced.

That they were the good guys. That anyone. Who disagreed. With their liberal program. On any point. Was so clearly. An idiot. And a racist. And a bigot. On the wrong side. Of history. They forgot. To actually. Tell the story. They assumed. That only. White. Supremacists. Would vote. For Trump. And that was.

A fatal mistake. If you want. To convince. A floating voter. It's not. A particularly. Good way. To tell. To tell him. That he. Must be a bigot. And a.

[8:43] And a. Idiot. Yet that's. Effectively. What they were saying. If you weren't. Totally bought. Into this. Liberal story. You were an idiot. You were stupid. Not a good way.

Really. To convince. A floating voter. Is it? According to this. This story. Though. Is starting to. Unravel. This liberal story.

If I'm. According to this. Liberal worldview. If I'm a black. Then clearly. I must buy. Into critical race theory. If. If I don't do that. I'm a coconut.

As the. Phrase is used. Somebody who's brown. On the outside. But white. In the middle. We've heard this. Precisely. Criticism.

Leveled at. Kami Badena. Haven't we? That she's brought. Into the white. Way of thinking. Well in a sense. That's true. But that doesn't. Make her an idiot.

[9:39] And a traitor. According to the. Liberal view. If I'm female. I must be a feminist. And I must be in favor.

Of abortion rights. But suppose. I'm a woman. Struggling to start. Or raise a family. On a small income. The right to abortion.

May not figure. Largely in my concern. The state of the economy. Does. But in the last. 60 years or so.

The liberal narrative. Has held sway. Supposedly. Progress is inevitable. Liberals always claimed. To be on the right side. Of history.

Marx claimed that. Of course. Stalin claimed that. But of late. The story. Has started to fray. A little. Over these issues.

[10:35] Of trans rights. And racism. For example. In this country. Of course. The Labour government. Finds it difficult. To cope with the fact. That we've had.

Three female prime ministers. Four female party. Leaders. And they've all been Tories. We've had two. Leaders of colour.

Richie Sunak. And now. Kemi Badenok. And they're both Tories. These stories. That the liberals. Are telling. Don't quite seem. To connect. With reality. And people.

Are beginning. To realise that. They're beginning. To find. In fact. That. Some of these. Are academic. Theories. That don't quite. Connect. With the real world. And are beginning.

To reject them. On that basis. In fact. The Democrats. Forgot. That there was. A story to tell. And they started.

[11:34] To consider. It a self-evident. Truth. But on the internet. Of course. There were lots. Of competing stories. On the internet.

You can find. Almost any story. That somebody. Would want to tell. And the Republicans. Seemed to have. Understood this. And they pulled off. A remarkable coup. They melded.

Many of these. Competing. And even. Contradictory. Stories. And of course. Many of them. Are contradictory. But they melded. Them. Into a reason. To vote. For Trump. In other words.

They seized. Control. Of the narrative. Progress. It seems. At least. As viewed. By Western. Liberals. Is not. Inevitable. After all. Because.

Its opponents. Are not all. Idiots. And bigots. And rather. Resent. Being told. That they are. If we want.

[12:32] To understand. Our passage. Today. And indeed. If we want. To understand. The rest. Of acts. We need. To keep. In mind. The importance. Of telling. The story. Luke.

As we said. Tries to. Stick. As close. As he can. To the literal. Truth. Well. I'm sure. What he teaches. Is a little. Literal truth. And he says. That at the beginning. Of his books. But even Luke. Can't tell us. That everything. That happened. John points out. At this. At the end. Of his gospel. Doesn't he. Says. If everything. Was written down. There wouldn't be.

Enough books. In the world. Even Luke. Who majors. On facts. And his style. Includes. Very little. Editorial comment. But he does.

Select facts. To tell a story. That's clear. From the way. It's written. And so. In Acts. 13. One to three.

[13:29] Luke. Lays the foundation. For the rest. Of his account. From what we can gather. From the New Testament. And elsewhere. And we're not told. A lot about this. But it seems.

That the church. In Jerusalem. Got a little bit. Boggled down. In disputes. Between those. Who regarded. The gospel. As a Jewish. Reform movement. Wanting to retain. The Mosaic law. And those. Who saw the new. Covenant. As radically different. We meet. Things like this. In time to time. In Acts. Acts 21. Verse 20. For example. Is an example.

I won't look it up now. That is an example. So Luke. Switches focus. In his narrative. He switches focus.

From Jerusalem. To Antioch. You notice. Don't you. That Barnabas. Is in the right place. At the right time.

[14:24] Noted before. His. Remarkable talent. For knowing. Where the action is. And turning up. In the right place. Barnabas. Achieves it. Yet again.

In Acts 11. We're told. That it was in Antioch. But the distinctiveness. Of the gospel. Became clear. It wasn't just.

Another Jewish sect. Among many. But a new. Radical way. Of living. And it justified. A new name. Christian. Acts 11. 26. It was in Antioch.

That it was made clear. That as I say. That this was not just. Another Jewish sect. But something really. New and different. A new story. In fact. So what does.

Luke tell us. Well it tells us. That in Antioch. He gives us a list. Of teachers. Isn't he? We assume. [15:25] He tells us. Because they were. The movers. And shakers. They were educated men. They came from. Various cultures. You can tell by their names.

There was even. At least one. Who was acquainted. With the corridors. Of power. Who knew. Men of influence. And yet. They don't attempt.

Just to exploit. That political influence. To their own advantage. Instead. They seek insight. From the Holy Spirit. To write. Their new story.

And there are. Two points. To note. First of all. The message. Was the same. As the one. Peter was preaching. This story. Was not new. In that sense.

But it was new. In the sense. They would tell it. To the Gentiles. In a new way. We find. This happens. Gradually. As we go through. Acts. I mean. In the.

[16:26] Next. In the last. Bit of. Chapter 13. That Daniel. Will be talking about. Next week. The message. Is first of all. Addressed to Jews. Barnabas. But it finishes.

In a way. That relates. To the Gentiles. And. Actually says that. At the end. The Gentiles. Heard this. And rejoiced. And that process.

Goes on. Until Paul. Gets to Athens. Where he. Preaches a sermon. Which is. Absolutely. Addressed. To Gentiles. Anyway.

Barnabas. Sorry. That's. The first point. Second point. To notice. Is that. Up to then. The spread of the gospel. Had been somewhat opportunistic.

People had been driven out. By persecution. Or traveled on business. And took the gospel. With them. But now. There was a change. Of strategy. Now.

[17:23] It was going to be planned. In fact. It was in Antioch. Where they invented. The idea of mission. As we think of it today. And we note.

That Paul. Barnabas. And Saul. Were the key people. Because they had a foot. In both the Jewish world. And the Gentile world. All we know. About Saul. Paul.

We can see. That he was well acquainted. With the. Greek thinking. As well as. Jewish thinking. He had a foot. In both camps. And therefore. Was the ideal person. To make this change.

So after they had fasted. And prayed. It says. These teachers. Placed their hand. On Barnabas and Saul. And sent them off. Well.

Okay. But where did they actually go? Well. They went to Cyprus. Which is an island. Of course. In the Mediterranean. And we noticed.

[18:24] They didn't. Directly. Head for the palace. In fact. For a while. They stayed in their comfort zone. Preaching to Jews. But then. An opportunity.

Presented itself. No less. Than the Roman official. Who was in charge. Of the region. Their initial introduction. Appears to have been.

By. Enimus bar Jesus. This sorcerer. So presumably. He'd been curious. Himself. At first. And perhaps.

Took Saul. And Barnabas. Along to. Teach. To talk to the proconsul. He was prepared to listen. Notice.

This is where. Paul. Changed his name. Or at least where. Luke tells us. That. Paul. Changed his name. Saul. Was the name. Of a Jewish king. Paul.

[19:19] Or Paulus. Was the name. Of this proconsul. It's the same word. The translation. Suggests. It's Paul. And Paulus. But. In the original text. It's the same. Of course. Whether that was the reason.

Paul. Changed his name. We don't know. But. Certainly. This is when. Luke tells us. About it. He's changed his name. From a Jewish one. To what is essentially. A Roman one.

Now. He would be called. Paul. The name of the. Roman governor. But then. Any mass. Realize. He's made a mistake. This was not.

His kind of thing. At all. He's described. As a sorcerer. One who wants. To use spiritual power. For his own ends.

He realized. He was losing. The argument. And as he was. Losing the argument. He was in danger. Of losing. His cushy position. In the pro consul. Staff.

[20:22] As well. But then. Of course. Paul and Barnabas. Would soon be gone. LMS.

Only had to hang in there. And he'd have. The opportunity. To worm. Back into the favor. Of the pro consul. Wouldn't he? Because he was there. He would be able.

As we might say. To regain control. Of the narrative. Logical argument. Would only get. The evangelists. So far. They needed.

To expose. Elemas. As a fraud. They needed. To tell a better story. To grip the heart. And mind. Of Sergius. So Paul. Needed. To make a stand. So we have.

This thing. It's probably. The nearest thing. In the New Testament. To what might. Consider a curse. You are a child. Of the devil. And an enemy. Of everything. That is right. You are full.

[21:19] Of all kinds. Of deceit. And trickery. Will you never. Stop perverting. The right ways. Of the Lord. What does Paul. Then do. Call. Call fire down. From heavens.

To consume. Elemas. He doesn't. Does he? He just. Says. Calls down. Temporary blindness. Just as a sign. Remember.

That's exactly. What had afflicted. Paul himself. On the Damascus road. In Paul's case. That had led to. Repentance. This doesn't seem.

To have been the case. For Elemas. Unfortunately. At least. We're not. Told that. But the warning. Was there. It was a warning. For Elemas. Himself. But it was also.

A sign. For the proconsul. That this man. Elemas. Was a deceiver. His power. Was fraudulent. So Elemas.

[22:17] Was exposed. As a fraud. An agent. Of evil. The truly. Amazing. Thing. Was not. Elemas. Tricks. But the teaching. About the Lord. That's what. Luke tells us.

It's actually. The teaching. About the Lord. That. That. Sergius. Found. Amazing. Neither. The sign. Nor. Indeed.

The. What. Elemas. Had been. Teaching himself. The teaching. About the Lord. Was a better story. And Sergius. Realised that. So.

Today. We ought to. Take note. Of the power. Narrative. Jesus. Used parables. As we said. And acted out. Signs. To teach the truth. But it's noticeable.

That even when we're not. Explicitly. Using stories. He will move the debate. Onto his own terms. We find this. Particularly. In the Sermon on the Mount. Actually.

[23:17] Let me just read. One verse. From the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew 5. 21. This is. You have heard. That it was said. To the people. Long ago.

Do not murder. And anyone. Who murders. Will be subject. To judgment. But I tell you. That anyone. Who is angry. With his brother. Will be subject. To judgment.

Then. Jesus actually. Goes on. To expand that. And uses. Same. Similar. Similar argument. About other laws. Of course. What they'd heard. Was true. It was said. To them.

People long ago. Do not murder. But what Jesus. Is doing here. Is telling that narrative. In a new way. He wasn't going to. Cede the battleground.

To the Pharisees. Whose idea. Basically. Was that. Holiness. Was about laws. And therefore. The more law. The more holy. Jesus said. No. That's the wrong way. To understand it.

[24:12] This is a full on. Out attack. On the. Pharisaic. World view. And the. Pharisaic. Narrative. Jesus. Above all. Understood. The need.

To control. The narrative. The whole. Sermon on the mount. Is precisely. Designed. To rest. Control. Of the moral. Debate. From the Pharisees. Jesus.

Would not. Enter. Into the academic. Debates. Of the rabbis. They were. Disputable. Details. Instead. He would. Tell an. Altogether. Better. Story. And this.

Was the need. That those. Teachers. In Antioch. Had grasped. They wouldn't. Get bogged. Down. In the circumcision. Debates. That were springing. Up in the Jerusalem. Church. They understood. That Jesus. Had made this. Irrelevant. They would not. Argue. With the Jews. Over the minutiae. Of the law. Paul would. Later. Write. Circumcision. Is nothing. And uncircumcision.

[25:07] Is nothing. Keeping God's. Commands. Is what. Counts. Of course. Circumcision. Was a command. But. Properly. Understood. It was keeping.

What. God's commands. That counts. We're told. That it was in Antioch. They were called. Christians. It was in Antioch. That this new. Religion.

If you want to think of it. That way. Was worthy. Of its own name. It was in Antioch. Would move. The gospel narrative. On in a conscious. And planned way.

As we've seen. In. Sometimes. This does. Does require. Rebuke. Of course. As it did. For Elemas. Jesus. Was certainly. Not afraid. Of this. Woe.

To you. Experts. In the law. Because you've. Taken away. The key. To knowledge. You.

Yourselves. Have not entered. And you. Have hindered. Those who were. Entering. Nowadays.

[26:03] This would probably. Be treated. As a non-crime. Hate incident. Incident. Sometimes. You do have to. Oppose the truth. This vehemence. Oppose. Sorry.

Oppose the tax on the truth. The vehemence. Enemus. Could not be allowed. To twist the gospel. To his own. Purposes. But it is.

Necessary. To think a little bit more. About this. I think. We rebuke. Not out of hypocrisy. But holy fear. People have been.

Accusing. Evangelicals. Of late. Of being so. Of claiming. To have. A monopoly. On the truth. Well. I suppose. That's true. In a sense. We do claim.

To have a monopoly. On the truth. But we present it. But it's not. Because we regard. We're the good guys. In fact.

[27:03] Evangelical. Thinking. Starts from the assumption. And preposition. That we're the bad guys. The gospel is important. Because we all need it.

And that does require us. To oppose the truth. Sometimes. And if we don't do that. Then it starts to unravel. Of course. Is what's happened over. The John Smythe.

Business. The error wasn't. And threat wasn't. Opposed. When it should have been. But let's just.

Think of some scriptures. To get this in our minds. 1 John 1 verse 10 says. If we claim. We have not sinned. We make him out. To be a liar. And his word.

Has no place. In our lives. And a bit later. John tells us. How we should react. And how we should. Relate to those around us.

[28:05] Sorry. Actually this. Well he does do that. Actually this quotation. Is from Jude. In fact. Jude 21. Jude 1. 22 to 23. It says. Be merciful.

Be merciful. To those who doubt. Snatch others. From the fire. And save them. To others. Show mercy. Mixed with fear. Hating even the clothing.

Stained by corrupted flesh. As I said. How much damage. Has been done. To many young lives.

And certainly. To the evangelical cause. By failing to rebuke.

John Smythe. And others. Who twisted the gospel. To their own ends. But we could also say. Well what would a new story.

Look like. Paul's own take on this. Is found in 1 Corinthians. Isn't it. He says. Jews demand. Miraculous signs. Greeks look for wisdom.

[29:00] But we preach. Christ crucified. A stumbling block. To Jews. Foolishness. To Gentiles. But to those. Whom God has called. Both Jews.

And Greeks. Christ. The power of God. And the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God. Is wiser than man's wisdom. And the weakness of God.

Is stronger than man's strength. Paul confronts the world. While addressing it. In terms it can understand. The message needs to be.

Both spiritually powerful. And be wise. That it needs to be wise. May at first sight. Seem strange. If it's all. Depends on God's power.

But it does. Paul says. It does have to be wise. To the mature. We do impart wisdom. And it's interesting. That in Isaiah 52. Where we have this great description.

[29:57] Of the servant. What's the first. Property of the servant. That we're told. The first line. Of this great description. Says.

See my servant. Will act wisely. He will be raised. And lifted up. And highly exalted. And it's worth noting.

A bit more. Isaiah goes. And then goes on. To say. That he will be. Marred. Beyond human. Understanding. This contrast here.

Which adds drama. To the argument. In fact. It's the use. Of what is technically. Known as oxymoron. I know. So we'd use a technical word here. But. It doesn't seem to be. A non-technical word.

That says the same thing. Oxymoron. Is putting two. Contrasting ideas together. Which seem. At first sight. To conduct. To. Conflict. But actually.

[30:52] Point to a different. More. Deeper truth. And again. It's something. That Jesus. Himself. Used. Just think. Of the beginning. Of the sermon. On the mount. And the beatitudes.

Think of what this one says. Blessed are the meek. For they will inherit. The earth. One way. I did a comment. To that. Blessed are the meek. If they will inherit the earth.

If that's all right. With the rest of you. It's a contrast. Isn't it? But Jesus says. That those who are the meekest. Were those who will inherit the earth. And in particular.

If we're aiming to present. A biblical. View of humanity. It's worth thinking. Back to Genesis. Genesis. Where in Genesis. Genesis 1.

27. We read. So God created man. In his own image. In the image of God. He created him. Male and female. Who created them. Then he goes on to say.

[31:53] Genesis 2. Verse 7. The Lord formed the man. From the dust of the ground. And breathed into his nostrils. The breath of life. And the man became. A living being. Is this telling us that.

God is male and female. Is this telling us that. God is made of dust. Of course not. But it's telling us that. Humans are made in God's image.

Even though they're made of dust. Another contrast that Paul makes. Is that the story must be accessible to all.

Must be wise. But it must also be accessible. So he writes in 1 Corinthians. Brothers. Think of what you were. When you were called.

Not many of you were wise. By human standards. Some of them were of course. Those teachers we. Read about in the beginning of. Acts 13. But not many.

[32:53] Of you were wise. By human standards. Not many were influential. Not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world. To shame the wise.

God chose the weak things of the world. To shame the strong. You can't have a message. That requires a PhD in philosophy. To grasp it. And indeed.

One reason that liberalism. Is beginning to unravel. Is that nowadays. Is that nowadays. It's promoted on the basis of academic theories. Which often seem to defy common sense. Just think of critical race theory.

Or the trans ideology. Just doesn't relate to the real world. Ultimately does it? People are beginning to understand that.

But of course. On the other hand. The message does need to be robust enough. To stand up to academic attack. So it does need to be wise as well. It needs to be able to.

[33:53] Oppose the lies of the devil. At every level. Well I could say a lot more about this. But I'm sure you're all getting a bit. Thinking it's getting towards lunchtime.

So I'll draw to a close. But let's assure. That we like Paul and Barnabas. Have a message that is better than the world can offer.

We can think of that individually. If we talk to our friends and relatives. We can think of it as a church. Let's make sure that our message makes sense.

In the 21st century. It may be a message from the first century. But we live in the 21st century. And the message needs telling in a way that makes sense.

In the 21st century. While remaining the same message. The trouble with liberal theology is it's just that. It's liberal. It doesn't have the same message. We want to tell the same message.

[34:53] But in a way that makes sense today. There is a spiritual vacuum. As the prevailing liberalism comes under stress. I think Christianity.

There is some revival of interest in Christianity. It's becoming plausible now. In a way it wouldn't have been seen plausible. Even 10 years ago. There is a spiritual vacuum.

As the prevailing liberalism comes under attack. But at the same time. There are lots of competing narratives around. So you can look on the internet.

And find somebody. You'll tell you more or less anything. So let us learn to tell the gospel. In a way that the world can understand. That's what.

And they did in Antioch. That's what Paul and Barnabas started to do. That's what they planned to do. Let us be positive about it. In the way that they were.

[35:53] Let's be active about it. Proactive. About working out. How we can tell a better story. A true story. But one is better.

Than the falsehoods that the devil is telling. Okay. I'll stop there. And we'll move on.