

3 Called into Community

Erica Jong's novel *Fear of Flying* is in essence a description of some of the things that can go wrong as people frantically search for identity and meaning in a world which increasingly seems to make no sense. Freedom is the key word of our time, Jong seems to be saying, but freedom – political, economic, sexual, social, whatever – has tended to remove the boundaries, blur the edges. We are no longer certain where the road is, where we ought to be going (assuming we are going somewhere). 'Life has no plot', Jong writes. 'At least it has no plot while you're living. And after you die, the plot is no concern' (p 311).

Life has no plot. That seems to be a common experience. Otherwise why would so many people try to invent a plot for their lives and then do anything to try to make it work? And why do so many live what Ibsen calls 'life lies', in the hope that if they make-believe long enough the fake will become the reality? And why are we so tempted to live our lives through others whom we admire or love or envy? Life has no plot – and we don't like it!

We need a life with a plot, with a beginning, a middle, and an end, a life with signposts, with a plan and purpose and goal. Christians believe that there is such a life. Its not theirs naturally or innately or deservedly. But it becomes theirs.

This life-with-a-plot is the Jesus story. When it intersects with our story it becomes a life-saving and life-changing story. Jesus' life becomes our life; his story becomes our story.

To understand how this happens and why it needs to happen, we first have to tell our story, the story of a plot gone wrong. We have to tell it honestly, without the tricks of the spin doctors who want to make every story into a success story. Our story doesn't begin with us, but with Adam and Eve.

The old story

God called Adam and Eve to live in harmony with God, with each other, and with creation. Life had a purpose and goal. The story-line was clear and unambiguous. The plot became twisted and incoherent when sin came into the world. Life was then characterised by disobedience, disharmony, disorder, distress, and distortions. The rhythms of life were broken, they became jarring and discordant and out of tune with God and creation.

Things got so bad that God decided to bring the sorry story to an end and to start it again with a new cast of characters. So God called Abraham, and made promises to him and his children. But they were all descendants of Adam and Eve, and they too lost the plot. God called the people of Israel out of Egypt and made a covenant with them and gave them his laws and made them his people. But they were descendants of Adam and Eve, and they lost the plot. And so on and so on. In fact all of us descendants of Adam lost the plot, lost direction, and found ourselves trapped in a dead-end street from which there was no escape.

'Alas', said the mouse, 'the world is growing smaller every day. At the beginning it was so big that I was afraid, I kept running and running, and I was glad when at last I saw walls far away to the right and left, but those walls have narrowed so quickly that I am in the last chamber already, and there in the corner stands the trap that I must run into'. 'You only need to change direction', said the cat, and ate it up (Franz Kafka, *The Great Wall of China*, p 209).

That would have been the story of our lives if God had not intervened finally and decisively. God remembered his promises and at the right time he sent his Son into the world. Jesus is Son of God and son of Adam (Luke 3: 38). Jesus entered our history, our plotless lives, and became one of us, bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh. He came as another Adam, a second Adam, to start a new story for humankind.

The new story

Jesus walked no easy road. He endured the consequences of life under the old Adam. The only possible end to that life of sin and disobedience and distortion of all relationships was: 'the cat ate it up', in other words, death and separation from God. Jesus, the second Adam, gathered up all the twisted and distorted story-lines of our lives and took the whole lot with him to the cross. He died, given up on by his God, alone apart from a couple of criminals for company, outside the walls, in that unclean place, the Place of the Skull.

If that had been the end of his story, it would have been the end of us. But God raised his Son to life and set him at God's right hand far above all powers. God did this for the sake of creating a new people, a new humanity under the lordship of his Son (Eph 1:20-23).

We call this new people of God the church. The church came into existence by the creative word and work of the Holy Spirit (Eph 2:20), who is 'the Lord and Giver of life'. Just as the Spirit called the first creation into existence, so he calls into being the new creation, the church. And just as the old creation had its head - Adam - so the new creation has as its head the second Adam, Jesus Christ. All who belong to the new creation belong to Christ. We are, as St Paul says, members of the one body of which Christ is the Head.

We are members of the body of Christ. So no longer are we locked into the old story-line; we no longer live out the old plot, because by faith in Jesus Christ the Spirit's story of Jesus has become our story. So for those who are 'in Christ', joined by faith to him, it is no longer true that 'life has no plot'. Just how that comes about is the focus of the rest of this chapter.

Life with a plot

The new life in Christ, or the taking on of the Jesus story, begins with a call. This call intercepts each one of us just where we are. It is a call to become part of the new creation, a member of the church. We are not called into a vacuum nor into solitude or isolation. We are called into community. We are called by God's Spirit into fellowship, first of all with the Triune God (1 John 1:3; Eph 4:4-6), and then, mirroring that fellowship, we are called into a community of believers in Christ. The Christian community is the family within which our lives of faith are nurtured and maintained.

So to be called to be a Christian is to be called into the church, into community. We have no choice on this one. There's no such animal as a solitary Christian. We share our call to be 'in Christ' with all other believers. Together we form the church - the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, as we say in the Nicene Creed.

How do you get to be a member of the church, the body of Christ, the new community? Short answer: through the church! For reasons known only to God, the Holy Spirit has chosen the church to be his mouthpiece in calling men and women to discipleship, to faith in Christ, to fellowship with the Triune God.

The means by which the Holy Spirit, through the church, calls people to Christ is the word of God, the gospel of salvation, the Holy Spirit's powerful, life-changing story of Jesus (Rom 1:16). If the gospel is to do its job it has to be publicised, it has to get out into the public

square. So the church's job is clear: to tell out the Jesus story, invite others to become part of that story and so part of the church. The church is called to call (1 Peter 2:9).

The Jesus story is good news which is told, proclaimed, shared. God, who is rich in grace and mercy, has given the gospel to the church in many forms. There is, for example, the spoken word; then what is called the visible word, that is, baptism and the Lord's supper; then the speaking of absolution either privately or publicly; and finally the encouragement and comfort which Christians give each other in word and action.

Of these, baptism is of particular interest to us at this point. Baptism is the church's rite of initiation; it is God's way of making Jesus' story our story; it is one of the most common ways in which the Holy Spirit calls us to faith and fits us for life in community. As Paul says, 'In the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body' (1 Cor 12:13 NRSV). So as far as our life in Christ and in the church of Christ is concerned, our baptismal day is our birthday. It's a pity, isn't it, that we don't remember the anniversary of our baptism with the same care that we remember the anniversary of our birthday. Should we not celebrate both days?

The creative Word of God sustains the Christian life; it annihilates sin and sinner, meaninglessness and despair; it creates something new – order out of chaos, life out of death, resurrection out of crucifixion. The water has no independent life; it is the Word working in it that effects order and life and resurrection. No wonder that for Paul 'Baptism' can take on almost all the connotations which 'discipleship' had in the Gospels; here is the break with the old self for the sake of freedom to be immersed in the middle of the world and through it in a new creation. In Christopher Fry's play *A Sleep of Prisoners*, a number of British soldiers are billeted in a German church. They muse about their lives and the meaning of their location. One asks what they are all doing there; another answers, 'You were born here'. That is Baptism in its nature and essence.
- Martin Marty, *The Hidden Discipline* (Concordia, 1962), p 90.

But the church, remember, is the church of Jesus Christ; he is the head, the church is his body. So to be baptised means to be grafted into Christ, to become part of him. Or as St Paul says: 'I have died, but Christ lives in me' (Gal 2:20). Jesus is our Lord; we are his servants; he is the master, we are the disciples; he is king, we are his subjects. We enter his kingdom by being baptised 'into' or 'in' his name. When the name of Jesus is spoken over us, we are made his, we are committed to him as Lord, and his story becomes our story.

So close is the connection between our baptism and Jesus' story that Paul can say that when we were baptised we were baptised 'into his death'. That means that behind every Christian's baptism is the death of Christ. Jesus himself said that his death was in fact his 'baptism' (Luke 12:50); it was God's way of inaugurating the new creation.

But for the new creation to begin the old had to die. The old powers of sin and death which dominate the old creation had to be destroyed. There is no life without death. In the first instance that meant the death of Jesus, our representative and substitute. Jesus died. But in the very act of dying he brought to an end the domination of sin and guilt, and he killed death, brought its fearful rule to a close.

In the second instance, it means our death. Jesus' death was his baptism; our baptism is our death. For by being baptised into Christ's death we are baptised out of ourselves and gathered into Christ's name. The old church fathers used to say that baptism is our tomb and our womb; it spells the death of our old life and it is the birthplace of our new self, the new creation in Christ.

At an important stage in the film *Ben Hur* the hero (played by Charlton Heston) rescues the Roman consul Quintus Arrius (Jack Hawkins) from a watery grave. In gratitude to his saviour, Quintus Arrius who has no son of his own, adopts Judah Ben-Hur as his son. This act of adoption meant that Judah Ben-Hur (= 'Judah son of Hur') became Judah son of Arrius (or 'Arrius the Younger' as he was known), the son and heir which Quintus never had. Arrius' family became Ben-Hur's family; Arrius' story became Ben-Hur's story. All of his debts, obligations, and liabilities were extinguished by the adoption. In the eyes of Roman law, the old Judah Ben-Hur had died. A new man had been created, a man with a new story and a new future.

Our baptism means not only death with Christ but also new life with him. His *whole* story becomes our story. We are brought into a new relationship with the Triune God:

We are heirs of the Father,
we are joint heirs with the Son;
we are children of the kingdom,
we are family, we are one.

As baptised people who are united with Christ in his death and his resurrection, we move every day between our dying with Christ to sin, and our living with Christ in righteousness. Our dying begins at our baptism; we die every day; and our dying is only completed when our physical death occurs and the resurrection of the dead takes place. As long as we live here we find, like Paul, that 'our bodies show what his death was like, so that his life can also be seen in us' (2 Cor 4:10).

There is a journey, a process of dying, which begins at the instant of baptism, and which is not completed until physical death... Baptism is death; they are interchangeable terms in Scripture. Rather, since the double *significatio* is death and resurrection, we should say that the process is not complete until the resurrection of the dead.

- Jonathan D Trigg, *Baptism in the Theology of Martin Luther* (EJBrill, 1990), p 94

*Let water be the sacred sign
That we must die each day
To rise again by his design
as followers of his way.*

Thomas E. Herbranson

We can say, then, that the shape of the baptised life is cruciform, cross-like. This is because the baptised life is one of repentance and faith. Repentance means the death of the old self, and faith means taking on the Jesus' story, the life of Christ Jesus. In a sense, we baptised people are always only one day old, because our lives in Christ are always a return, each day, to our baptism.

To be baptised is to be called to life in Christ. We are like a child or a slave: called out of one bondage into another, out of slavery to sin to service of Christ. Jesus used a different picture to depict our baptismal call: he spoke of the call to discipleship. Those who want to follow me, he said, must follow in my footsteps exactly. They must say No to themselves,

take up their cross daily, and follow me. To be Jesus disciple – or to be baptised into Christ – is a call to the crucified life, the disciplined life, in which we daily die to self and live for Christ alone.

Oddly enough, we don't have to hunt around for opportunities to put this daily dying into practice. As we shall see in subsequent chapters, the ordinary duties of life provide the arena for carrying out the work and purpose of our baptism, that is, for dying and putting sin to death. For the fact is that, although we belong to the new creation, we still live in the old creation. It is here, in this world, at this time in human history, that we live out our baptismal calling, and it is here that we are to 'die daily'.

Life would be so much easier if we could say that sin is dead and death is dead. But it's not. We can only say that we have died to sin and death. We can't say that our old selves and the old life is gone; we can only say that we are no longer compelled to live the old way of life. We can't say that the rulers and powers of the old age have been destroyed; but we can say that they no longer have power over us, for Christ has conquered them. Because we have been baptised into Christ, his victory story is our victory story.

So the new life, the baptismal life has a hiddenness about it. It is 'hid in Christ with God', as Paul says. It is a life of faith and hope. Faith, because it looks to Jesus alone for life and health and every good. Hope, because it is turned with confidence toward the future, a future which comes to us with the compliments of our Lord Jesus Christ. We may not know the details of that future, but its general shape is clear, and its goal is certain: the fulness of life with Him whose life-story we share. Since he lives we know without a shadow of doubting that we will live also.

And because our lives are lives of faith and hope, they are also lives of love. Love is that gift of God which is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit whom God gives us (Rom 5:5). By love and in love we are summoned to lead a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called (Eph 4:1).

Faith and hope are directed to God. But love is directed to our neighbour. Secure in our identity before God, knowing who we are, we are freed to focus on our neighbour.

Marching to a different beat

Right here, in the focus on the neighbour, we see the difference between the Christian and the secular mindset and attitude and goals. You probably have an acquaintance or friend who is a wonderfully caring person, a fine parent, faithful spouse, honest citizen, active in community affairs, but not a Christian. Your friend's life and your life are similar in many respects; a casual observer would probably not pick the difference, apart from the obviously-Christian activities such as prayer and worship. And yet *before God* your life is radically different, because in faith and hope you look only to God and give all glory to him, and in love you seek to serve the neighbour instead of being curved in on yourself.

Just how different your attitude and lifestyle is becomes apparent when we consider what forces and values are shaping our society. In a recent book, *The McDonaldisation of Society*, sociologist George Ritzer argues that modern societies are dominated by the organisational principles and values of the fast-food industry. The key elements of this industry are efficiency, quantification, predictability, and control by substituting non-human labour for human labour. Ritzer points out how dehumanised everyday life becomes when such principles no longer serve human needs, but become ends in themselves.

Behind the drive towards the McDonaldisation of society lies a number of frightening assumptions: that it doesn't matter if people are dehumanised, or if people no longer serve

people; that efficiency is more important than individual needs; that quantity is superior to quality; that its better if everything is the same.

McDonaldisation means the end of service and servanthood. In 'service stations' customers pump their own petrol and clean their own windscreens. Supermarkets offer self-service: you wander up and down aisles hoping you'll find what you are looking for. Banks encourage self-service and penalise you if you want to be served by a fellow human being. Increasingly, whatever service there is is offered by humanoids, robot 'humans' without a heart.

SOMETIMES THE BEST SERVICE
IS NO SERVICE

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It is in this context that you have your vocation. You live for your neighbour and give creative attention to their needs. Many people will see you as a bit odd. Quaint perhaps. Don't let it worry you.

It's a furphy that we Christians are so heavenly-minded that we are of no earthly good. We are, in fact, found right in the thick of things, focusing on the needs of real flesh-and-blood neighbours. But it is true, we *are* out of step with the world. We march to the beat of a different drummer. We live for the neighbour and we share God's agenda for getting the neighbour loved. That is what Christian vocation is all about.