

Cinderella

Around this time of year theatres are gearing up to what is usually their most lucrative business – putting on a pantomime. So I thought I would muse on just one of them - Cinderella. You all know the story. I had thought of reading it to you in a version I have, which is written in the style of the great Dr Spooner, the c.19th Oxford don who had the habit of mixing up the first letters of words – you remember that he told one student he had ‘tasted two worms, and must leave Oxford by the town drain’. Well, that version of the story was all about Cinderella and the Pransome Hince, and how her Gairy Fodmother told her she would bance at the dall, despite her sugly isters. But then I thought you might get as irritated as I did.

I would like to talk about three things relating to Cinderella. The first is not so important, but worth thinking about nonetheless. You will all remember that when Cinderella runs away from the ball at midnight, she leaves behind her shoe, and the way that the handsome prince finds her is by asking all the young ladies of the district to try the shoe on, to see who it fits. And we are used to the idea, from pantomimes, that it was a glass slipper – which sounds rather uncomfortable, but very romantic. The truth is that we have got the story wrong. The story we know comes from a French book of fairy tales, and in that story, the slipper is made not of glass, but of fur. In the old French in which it was written, the two words sound the same – vair and verre. So you can see how the mix-up happened. But getting it a bit wrong doesn’t spoil the story. Now I think that is important when we get to think about what we believe. Some people get ever so excited about everything we believe being exactly right and precisely correct. You can understand that. But it is most unlikely that we ever will get everything exactly right and precisely correct in this life, at least. We may be as wildly out as exchanging fur for glass. But what is more important is that we get the story right in outline, not in detail. Our Christian journey is just that – a journey on which we make more and more discoveries. We can’t get it completely right from the beginning. Fur or glass – the shoe still fitted, and the couple lived happily ever after.

And that is my second point from Cinderella. It is a story of happy endings. That also is true of the Baptism service, for instance. It is a very realistic and down-to-earth, in that it talks at the beginning about the fact that being baptised and following Jesus isn’t always easy. It talks about ‘fighting valiantly against sin, the world and the devil’. Any of us who have tried it knows that it is sometimes very hard to keep to the right things. But then later in the service there are two reminders at least that the end of the story is a very happy one. After the baptism we ask God that our new brother and sister in Christ will ‘come to the inheritance of the saints in glory’ and then we pray for ourselves, that God will ‘prepare us

for that glorious day when the whole creation will be made perfect' in Jesus. The journey of faith we begin at baptism ends with the day we arrive at our home in heaven, when the fight is over and the struggles are past. It isn't fashionable to talk about heaven – largely because we don't really know what to say. But there is a great deal of difference between a life which is aimlessly wandering about, and a life which has got a purpose and a goal. What God offers to us in baptism is just that – a goal we are headed for, and place to look forward to. Pippa and I used to go walking in the Alps. Most days we walked quite strenuously up and down some wonderful mountains. We got tired, but because we knew where we were heading, it was exhilarating. On the couple of days when we just walked about a town, it was much more tiring, even though it was on the flat – because there was no sense of purpose in where we were heading. Christian discipleship offers to us all, whatever our age, a purpose, a goal, a direction. As the old spiritual puts it 'I know where I'm going, and I know who's going with me.' In church we met in the presence of the living Lord Jesus, whose story was one with a happy ending. The defeat of the cross was turned into the victory of Easter morning – a transformation even more amazing than pumpkins into coaches and mice into footmen.

The third point from Cinderella is that it is a story of goodness overcoming evil. The ugly sisters stand for all that is wrong in the world. They oppress Cinderella, and abuse her. She is virtually their slave. They think they have all the power, and the good things in life, and that one of them will be the person to marry the Prince. They are full of wickedness and spite, and seem to have the upper hand. That is how the world can seem to us when we read the newspapers. The injustice and wickedness and exploitation of the weak by the strong happens between nations and within nations, as well as in families like the one in the story. It would have been all too easy for Cinderella to have been drawn into all that – and to have hated her ugly sisters in return. She could have become bitter and twisted. She could have wanted revenge for all the suffering they had put her through. But the story isn't like that. She stays in the right. She remains true to her own good self, and that wins through in the end. Of late we have been inundated with attacks and counter attacks in the Middle East. We have to go on praying that people avoid being drawn into retaliation, because two wrongs will never make a right. The story of Cinderella is about goodness overcoming evil, and right overcoming wrong. Some people might say that to apply that to the real world, rather than to fairy stories, is unrealistic and naïve. That would be true if it were not for the *true* story we also remember at the altar, of the unjustified killing of a young man who had done nothing wrong. If that had been the end of the story, looking for the triumph of good over evil would be wishful thinking. But if, as we believe, he overcame that evil by rising from the dead, then we are not being naïve, we are being more realistic and true to the facts than anyone else. We need to hold on to the longer view, God's view. As I tried to put it in the hymn I wrote some years ago 'To the unknown, in this world and in heaven we look with faith for all is in your care.' The future is good, because it is in God's hands, as also are you and me.