

FOWEY FABLES NO.38

Over the last 20 years I have been writing study notes on Bible books firstly for our Bible school students and then, by putting them on our website, for anyone else who would appreciate some help in getting started with learning from God for themselves. My approach has always been to do this by a combination of questions to encourage us to search the Bible for ourselves, together with my own notes containing some clues which I thought might help the process. By the beginning of 2016 I had completed studies on 64 of the 66 Bible books. Only two books remained, First and Second Chronicles. I do not know why I left these books till last. Somehow they had never struck me as important. How wrong I was! I have now completed I Chronicles and am well on the way to finishing II Chronicles. The value of these books has blown me away and particularly their relevance to the present day.

Two aspects of I and II Chronicles had long put me off. Firstly there were pages and pages of names and sometimes numbers. Do you find reading a phone book fun? Nor do I. Secondly so much of the material in Chronicles is a repetition of the stories in the books of Samuel and Kings so why bother to read them? It is also striking that Chronicles is a rather tame version of the same stories in the other books. Many of the more colourful accounts of the misdeeds of some of the heroes of the Old Testament seem to have been censored. It is a bit like reading about famous people in a newspaper like the Times of London compared to a tabloid paper that entertains the masses with some juicy scandal.

So why did God give us Chronicles? The answer can be found right at the end of II Chronicles, in chapter 36:22,23. These two verses are repeated exactly as the opening of the book of Ezra suggesting the strong possibility that the books of Chronicles and Ezra were written by the same person, presumably Ezra himself. Ezra was described as a passionate student of the word of God and a devoted teacher who also lived what he taught.(Ezra 7:10) What a great combination! The beginning of the book of Ezra sets the scene. The first group of Jews who had been prisoners in Babylon and now Persia for 70 years were now being released to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple and re-establish their nation but who were they really as a people? Hardly any of those who returned would remember their country and previous way of life. Probably they would mostly be the third generation immigrants whose great-grandparents had spoken Hebrew but now their language was Aramaic, the language of their conquerors. To make matters worse the last 23 years before the final destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 586BC had been a dismal time of spiritual decline in which God had been rejected and His Word ignored. We can imagine also that when that earlier generation had been hauled off to be slaves of Nebuchadnezzar the last items they would be likely to have in their pathetic bundles of possessions would be the sacred writings.

So the Jews now returning to the country of their ancestors would urgently be asking the questions – Who are we? Who is our God of whom we have heard only fragments of information? If our God is as great as some of our old people say He is, why did this experience of exile happen to us? And could we avoid it all happening again? It was to answer these urgent queries that the books of Chronicles were written. Understandably the writer did not bother with much of the detail of Samuel and Kings but stuck strictly to what would help his lost and confused readers.

In 2016 we face a similar problem. Young people today live in a world which has changed from that of 3 generations ago more profoundly than through any previous period of history. They speak a

different language, and have different values and customs. But they have heard fragments of the stories of their old people which intrigue them even if they do not really understand the earlier world being described. Sadly their parents have often failed them by being too busy with their own struggles to be the bridge between the past and the present. It is not enough when pressed for answers by our kids for us to repeat the clichés of earlier generations. We need to start to tell the story of God and man again from the beginning. Just like the writer of Chronicles did.

A few weeks ago we had another Bible conference at the Lodge entitled, "Facebook or Face God?" to explore the question of how to make a difference in 2016. Six of our lecturing team contributed and the whole morning came together beautifully. We agreed that one of the most effective ways to be heard by a new generation is to tell stories in which our hearers can see themselves. That is exactly what Ezra did - and so did Jesus.

Nick has been spending this year training as a secondary teacher with his special subject being history. He is finding the stories of our history to be a powerful way of grabbing the interest of young people. Much of our traditional history teaching is infiltrated with half truths which tell the stories how we would like them to have been rather than how they really happened.

All our history begins with Creation and the Fall which different cultures have preserved to different degrees. In this past few weeks we have had two delightful visitors, Paul Thompson, who was a student back in the 70s and has been an encouraging friend ever since, and his friend Henry who is an indigenous Australian from outback New South Wales. It has been fascinating to hear from Henry how much of the early stories of Genesis have been preserved in the history of his people. Similar fragments are found in almost all original national histories. This is why it is so effective even with people who think they know nothing of the Bible to begin with the book of Genesis. Often if we do this, people will surprise us by warming to the story with which they feel at home.

The most important story in history is the record of Jesus Christ. Some of us were brought up to be familiar with the New Testament and some were not. Again it is the Holy Spirit who takes the stories of Jesus and quietly confirms their truth and importance. He then offers us a place in, for example, the parables Jesus told.

We continue to enjoy the huge privilege of being able to provide our Christian leadership training programme to whomever the Lord sends to us. These days some of our students live at the Lodge but many live locally and come in by the day. Most are part time because they have other responsibilities in work, study or family. We welcome all of them. It is so exciting to be able to feed the hungry with a life transforming message. Please send more people our way if God puts their stories on your heart.

On the last Sunday of January we had some heartbreaking news. Vipul Kharat, who had lectured at the Lodge on and off for over 10 years, had died suddenly during a ministry trip to India. He was only 52 years old. His funeral a week later was huge because so many people from so many nations had been blessed by knowing and learning from Vipul. It was one of those times when we wondered why the Lord let it happen. The answer is already becoming clear as so many of those he had encouraged were beginning to say, 'it looks now like God has a job for me!' We all felt very deeply for his wife Suzanne and his 11 year old son.

As well as having Nick, Tracey and our gorgeous grand-daughter Eva living on site, it has been a real thrill this year to have Pete come back to the Lodge after many years in Turangi. He felt called to return to share in our ministry by using his very practical skills in management, particularly in IT, in both the medical practice and the community at the Lodge. His girl-friend Christal has also become part of our team so we are having a lot of fun. Life is never boring! After 9 months they believe they are called to return to Turangi to jobs there. We will miss them greatly but they will leave a lasting mark on all that goes on at the Lodge.

Talking of Turangi, we were on holiday recently in the middle of the North Island and got to catch up with Sam Chapman who with his wife Thelma and family was such an important part of our lives for many years. They are making a real impact back in the community from which Sam originally came. We all had many stories to tell. Since then Sam has had several stays in hospital. We hope greatly to see him well and flourishing again. He still has so much to offer.

We would love to hear more of your stories. What adventures have you had? What discoveries have you made? How can we help and encourage each other?

Our love in Christ

Tony and Christine