

## Verse for the Year 2022

### Sermon 23-1-22 (SC)

#### Romans 15: 1-13

In Lime Street, Newcastle, there is a converted granary called Seven Stories. It is a space dedicated entirely to books and the art of storytelling. As you might have guessed, the name Seven Stories is a play on words. At Seven Stories, there are indeed seven floors, but the real surprise is that each floor explores one of the seven basic plots, the seven basic storylines which unify all the many stories we love from all around the world.

Now, if you are unfamiliar with the seven basic plots, they are as follows. But as I go through, you will know them right away, I'm sure. In no particular order ...

1. Overcoming the Monster – Jurassic Park
2. Rags to Riches - Cinderella
3. The Quest – The Lord of the Rings
4. Voyage and Return – Back to the Future
5. Comedy – Four Weddings and a Funeral
6. Tragedy – Macbeth
7. Rebirth – It's a Wonderful Life

So here are the 7 basic plots, and here's the question to go with them. What story is the Church trying to tell? After 150 years, what is St Paul's story?

Now, you could say that we are putting the cart before the horse here, and you would be correct. Because the church is trying to tell something of God's story, the story of stories, we are naturally going to find elements of all 7 plots interwoven into all that the church has to say. But above all, I find the task of telling the story of the Church is a summons to adventure. God calls us to adventure. And we have seen that depicted so powerfully already in Dylan and Evelyn's baptism. Baptism is how we welcome others into the great adventure.

But here's another question: do people have to be perfect before the church welcomes them into their midst? Do I have to be perfect before I can start the great adventure? Does the Church itself have to be perfect before we can set off together on our great quest of faith?

No. The adventure meets us where we are. In a glorious mess, where we sometimes get it wrong, but where we also, sometimes, get it right.

This year, the Bible verse we have chosen to celebrate our great adventure, are the words from St Paul, after whom our church is named. And it's a verse which comes toward the end of his great letter to the Church in Rome.

*Welcome everyone, as Christ welcomed you, to the glory of God.*

Perhaps, we could add another storyline, another plot, to those listed above. It should be called “grace.” Where despite our flaws, regardless of whether we fully iron out all our wrinkles in this lifetime, regardless of whether we overcome our vices and weaknesses to achieve great things or not, regardless of whether we finish this life’s race feeling like a champion or a villain, God welcomes all who put their trust in him.

*Welcome everyone, as Christ welcomed you, to the glory of God.*

Remember, the story of grace meets us where we are, because strictly speaking, it doesn’t start with us, but with the hero, Jesus Christ, the story of the Church doesn’t start with what we do, but what Jesus has done for us. *Welcome everyone, as Christ welcomed you, to the glory of God.*

But what does it mean to welcome somebody? Is it something we extend only to newcomers who cross our threshold? Is there a limited window of opportunity to extend and receive a welcome? Is it limited to cups of tea, church fetes, and jumble sales?

Well, here’s something I’ve discovered. I’ve tried to understand what St Paul meant by the word “welcome.” And after some digging around, I have found that the word is based on a visual image. It is based on an action. “To pick up.” In fact, trying my best to translate the word St Paul uses here, I think the best English translation I can come up with is “to pick up and join to oneself.” That’s what welcome means “to pick up and join to oneself.” It is then, to accept people as they are, just as Christ accepted us, and to join stories.

*Welcome everyone, as Christ welcomed you, to the glory of God.*

This year, we are reflecting on 150 years of God’s story, a story called “grace”, where we are to welcome everyone, as Christ welcomed us. We are to lift up the outsider and join them to ourselves. This year, may we all receive and extend to others, the welcome St Paul speaks of, the welcome of God.