

**“Diving Into Life”**

(Romans 6.3-11)

Grant Bullen

**Story**

Jesus taught,

*‘Those who seek to keep their life safe, holding onto it desperately, will end up losing it... losing it all. But those willing to lose their life, to let it all go, will **find** life... life in abundance.’* (Luke.9.23-4)

The Christian faith is not a collection of philosophical constructs.

Our Way is embodied in the Story of Jesus of Nazareth, the One revealed as the Christ – Word made flesh.

Tonight, we gather in the dark and retell our sacred story... beginning with Creation and culminating in the death and resurrection of the Christ.

We enter his life, his Way... via our engagement with the Story.

But two things constrain our entry...

- There is our jaded familiarity. We’ve heard it all many times before...
- Then, there’s the institutional neutering of this story, making the death and resurrection of Christ into a fleshless recitation of propositional doctrine – barren disembodied formulae that we’re told we must believe. (If you’re frightened by a story’s power, there is no better way to kill it.)

Tonight, let’s enter this story, the heart and centre of faith, with a fresh openness... allowing it to take us wherever it will.

***The Orphan Boy and the Elk Dog***

So, as a fresh point of entry, I want to tell a Native American story.

(It’s not the same story as ours, but it has resonances that may help us find a new way in...)

It is the story of an orphan boy, Long Arrow, who feels himself called to undertake a heroic task in order to find his rightful place in his tribe. And so, he sets out to find a mysterious creature called the Elk Dog. He goes on a long and difficult journey in this quest, coming eventually to the Great Mystery Lake. There at the edge of the water, he falls into a deep sleep.

When Long Arrow woke there was a beautiful child standing before him... a boy dressed in a dazzling white robe decorated with porcupine quills.

The boy said, *"We have been expecting you for a long time. My grandfather invites you to his lodge."*

Pointing to the lake he said, *"Come. Follow me."* And with that, he transformed into a kingfisher and dived into the water, down to the bottom of the deep, deep lake.

Powerfully afraid, Long Arrow thought, *"How can I follow him and not be drowned?"*

But then he said to himself, *"I always knew this path would be costly. And in setting out to find the Elk Dog, I already threw my life away."* And so, he dived into the lake.

To his surprise the water parted before him... he could breathe and see.

Down, down he went, into the deepest depths of the cold water...

And there... the water ended, and he found himself in a valley...

And before him was a large imposing tepee.

Waiting for him was the beautiful child. *"Welcome! Come, enter my grandfather's lodge."*

At the back of the tepee, sitting in the place of honour, was an old man. Such was the power emanating from him, that Long Arrow knew he was in the presence of a Great One.

The Spirit Chief welcomed him... offered him food... and after Long Arrow had eaten, they sat in silence for a long time.

When the Great One spoke he said, *"Others have come before you, from time to time. But they were always afraid of the deep water. And so, they went away with empty hands. But you, grandson, you were brave enough to plunge-in, and therefore you are chosen to receive a wonderful gift to carry back to your people."*

## **Our Story**

Our story is of Jesus of Nazareth, who hears God calling him to a life-journey for the salvation, the liberation of his people.

And so, he leaves the conventional life in Galilee.

His vocation as the Christ is confirmed in baptism, tested in the desert, and lived-out in years of public ministry... a journey of conflict, struggle and suffering.

His road led him inevitably to Jerusalem... the place of crisis.

On that night in the Garden of Gethsemane, when he knew with certainty that to continue on this path meant death, he fell into the fear and horror of it all. His agony... his fear... was so extreme he sweated blood.

*“Father, I can’t do this. Show me another way. Give me any other cup to drink but this.”*

But as his breath calmed, and he felt once again the stillness of his Father’s presence, his inner voice came... *“I always knew this path would be costly. In leaving Nazareth to pursue God, I already threw my life away.”*

*‘Those who seek to keep their life safe, holding onto it desperately, will end up losing it... losing it all. But those willing to lose their life, to let it all go, will **find** life... life in abundance.’*

And so, when death stood before him... Jesus plunged in.

He made no attempt to escape, but waited for the temple guard to take him.

He made no defence before priests and governor.

He gave himself over to torture and cross.

With arms stretched wide on its timbers... when death came that Friday afternoon... he dived in.

He dived into the darkness from which no-one returns...

But to his surprise, the blackness parted before him... and in its deepest depths, he came to a tomb-like shelf of stillness... a place of quiet waiting.

It was there God found him – coming in the sweetness of dawning light – and carried him to a new land of unimaginable life.

As the resurrected Christ, he returned to his people, bringing the salvation, the freedom that he had dreamed of when he was just a peasant-carpenter in Galilee... before he left all that... before he dived in.

## **The Metaphor of Baptism**

In tonight's reading from *Romans*, Paul tries to give flesh to his experience of Christ's resurrection. Using baptism as his metaphor, he says,

*'We dive into the deep waters with Jesus, and with him we die to our old lives. We plunge in... into the deepest depths... and with Christ, we too are drawn up, by God, into the light of this new resurrected life.'*

Tonight, that's what we do.

We dive in... into the story, the life, the path of Christ Jesus.

We let go of all that old stuff we're holding onto... (all that stuff we believed would keep us safe)...

We let it all go. We die to it...

We dive into Death. We dive into Life... trusting that God will carry us safely to the New Land of indescribable light.

## **Conclusion: George MacDonald**

Nineteenth century Congregationalist minister, George MacDonald, a major influence on many notable 20<sup>th</sup> century authors, including CS Lewis and Tolkien, wrote new stories, fairy tales, to open-up fresh access to *The Story* (the Christ Story) of our faith.

There is this scene in one called *the Golden Key*, where the heroine, Tango, is searching for the "country whence the shadows fall". She goes to the Old Man of the Earth to see if he knows the way. He doesn't, but he tells her to go to the Old Man of the Fire, who does.

He tells her the only way to the Old Man of the Fire is by a hidden river. He stoops over and raises a huge stone from the floor of the cave... revealing a great hole that went straight down... down, down. "That is the way," he says.

"But there are no stairs" says Tango.

The Old Man of the Earth looks at her... "You must throw yourself in. There is no other way."

Jesus taught,

*'Those who seek to keep their life safe, holding onto it desperately, will end up losing it... losing it all. But those willing to lose their life, to let it all go, will **find** life... life in indescribable abundance and wonder.'* (Luke.9.23-4)