

My cousin's daughter was, all considered, a rather contented child. Well fed, adequately housed, unspectacularly but soundly educated, with a sufficiency of friends to play with, a colour tv to watch when friends were unavailing and just the right number of loving parents and caring relatives. There was however, one piece missing from this jigsaw of suburban childhood contentment, one thing which kept Emily's almost perfect childhood 'almost', and this was a pet. One idyllic summer's day, however, even this deficiency was made good and Emily skipped into the garden to find herself confronting the twitching nose, red eyes, white fur and lop ears that comprised her new pet rabbit.

"What will you call him?" Mother asked.

Without a moment's hesitation the answer came:

"Rhubarb."

Those of a certain age will realise that this is not quite so bizarre a name as may first seem: Rhubarb was the lead character in an extremely popular children's cartoon of the 1970s. OK in the cartoon he was a dog, but it's only rather older people than Emily who feel the need to be quite so speciesist with their pets names.

And so Emily's life was now perfect: she was diligent, nay religious, in her care of her lapine friend and Rhubarb for his part was dedicated to his rôle of eating grass and frolicking in his run. Then, after several weeks of girlhood bliss, one night, the suburban garden was visited by a fox. Alas, this fox had not read Beatrix Potter. He did not sport a waistcoat and white trousers and read the newspaper. It was a real one and Rhubarb suffered the fate that all rabbits do when a easy opened hutch latch meets a hungry fox. He became main course on the dinner menu.

A gruesome sight greeted Mum the morning after the arrival of Rhubarb's unwelcome dinner guest. The scene was less Watership Down, more Quentin Tarantino. What remained of Rhubarb looked surprisingly like a jar of strawberry jam dropped on the floor of a hairdressers— red lumps with bits of fur in it— it was not a pretty sight. Rhubarb's mortal remains were hastily consigned to the dustbin just seconds before Emily's urgent question reached her mother's ears:

"WHERE'S RHUBARB?"

Mum thought on her feet.

“He’s had to go away, to see his mother. She isn’t very well. He’s had to go back and visit her.”

Surprisingly enough this seemed to be accepted as a satisfactory explanation, and there were no more questions about rabbits. Summer came and went and the autumn nights closed in, and it seemed that Emily had forgotten about her former furry friend.

Then one night at dinner mum tried a new dessert, one that she remembered from her childhood but Emily had never had before. Fruit pie. Her daughter seemed to relish this new food and it wasn’t till there was very little left in her bowl that she thought to ask;

“ Mum, what was in the pie?”

“It’s rhubarb, dear”

Hysterics would be a mild word for what ensued. Inconsolable would be closer to the mark. Emily had been spared the knowledge that Rhubarb had been consumed by a fox only to later have the incomparably worse shock of thinking that her mother had lied about him going home and had cooked him in a pie. *Oh what a tangled web we weave.*

Lying is universally loathed and it is also universally practiced. Although we disdain dishonesty in most circumstances it is generally considered acceptable to fib a little when truth-telling might be just too unpleasant for the other person to bear.

‘Nice to meet you’

‘That new haircut really suits you’

‘Yes, orange and black stripes make for a great decorating scheme’

‘Nice sermon vicar’

‘Rhubarb has gone to visit his mother’.

The truth is smoothed over, feelings are spared and no-one is any the worse for it. Being economical with the truth does indeed help us all get along. Anyone who has ever met someone who wants to always tell it as it is will know just how much honesty can clog up the wheels of human interaction.

But like anything that proves effective, we overuse this stratagem. If I can sometimes make the world a better place by pretending it isn't as it is, why not pretend all the time? Tell some porkies and spread a little happiness?

It is only really something we can do in the short term and for relatively unimportant things. With any luck our friend will be happy with her hair cut until, hopefully she gets to a decent hairdresser who will tactfully right the trichological wrongs. But anything from a dead rabbit upward and we are weaving ourselves too tangled webs.

One of the biggest lies we tell our children is that "You can have whatever you want if you really want it and you believe in yourself." It simply isn't true, never has been and never will be. You can see the results of this pervasive philosophy in the bemused faces of those who Simon Cowell has rudely disabused of the notion that they are or ever could be great singers or entertainers. We are simply storing up disappointment, disillusionment and disenchantment for the future.

And often as Christians we too can be found spinning like a politician on a waltzer in order not to scare people or worry them. We can frequently be found papering over the truth in order not to scare ourselves.

One of the readings frequently used at Harvest Festival is the talke known as the parable of the rich fool. Here, one year a rich farmer has a bumper harvest. His response is to build more and more barns to store his newy-increased wealth, happy in the knowledge that he can continue to lay back and live the good life. Riches locked away, God points out that as he is about to die, this was a rather foolish stratagem. That tale is a very good example of something we would immediately start larding with spin. In vivid nightmare colours the tale tells of the futility of trusting in riches. God is not terribly accommodating. His big line is: "You fool!"

It is scary stuff. Who among us is not trying to fill their storehouses? Who among us is not seduced by the attractions of consumer culture? Who among us will not need their own pockets stuffed full before they will consider the needs of others? Small wonder we shy away from this part of the gospel and reach for the white lies.

But let us not. This parable is not a stick to beat us with. Nothing in the gospels or anywhere else in the Bible is a stick to beat us - or anyone else- with. Everything in our Gospel is an out-flowing of and a window into God's love. What sounds like ter-

rible judgement is a warning. Love sometimes gives warnings. Don't play on the railway lines. Don't go too close to the edge of the cliff. Don't leave the hutch door open. Don't be fooled by the attractions of wealth.

It is only natural to want to shield your children from the bad things in life, to protect them from upset. Sometimes this can be achieved by shutting their eyes, by inventing tales of rabbits gone away on a family visit. But sometimes they will only be safe with their eyes wide open. This is what our Old Testament reading asks us to do. Untangle the web of our deceptions, trust in our Heavenly Father, and open our eyes.