

So what place has the story?

I wonder how you do it? I remember all too vividly the continual anxious search for the new idea or illustration, the mental gymnastics of trying to submit this nugget to the readings set for the week and the attempt to develop a logical argument. Finally, there was the awesome responsibility of delivering this melange as the Word with a capital W... and the silence that followed. I did it, like so many, week on week on week on week.

Now I tell stories. Christian ministers may frown when stories are mentioned. In their minds stories usually have the word "fairy" before them, or they are shorthand for lying. More seriously, many have been brought up in the Modernist tradition and see preaching as giving a lecture in dogmatics built upon the sure foundation of scientific rationalism. They feel the need to prove their thoughts in logical terms and relate them to grand theoretical schemes. Against this, the story can easily be dismissed as a poor little anecdote, at best a little sideline that illustrates the point and flow of dogma.

The truth, I would suggest, is rather different. In fact, all human communities use stories of a certain sort to negotiate truth and right. As I write this piece, war is threatened against Iraq. The newspapers are full of stories about the why and wherefores of this action. Key questions about the war are far from settled. Is it really about self-defence in the face of weapons of mass destruction, or is it about oil? Is it part of the "war against terror", and what happened to the "ism" that followed? Some aspects of these stories can be settled by recourse to "facts", such as the dossier on the evidence for weapons of mass destruction, but at the heart of any such public story is a question that cannot be settled by an appeal to simple evidence. This is the question of human motivation. Is Saddam Hussein actually bent on expansionism? What are George Bush's real intentions? Is he looking to satisfy his cronies in the oil industry? Does he like the glory of the big player on the world stage? Does he even care about non-Americans?

Such questions can never be settled by empirical data. Instead, human beings have to form a judgement about people's true motivations and it is a judgement that is expressed in the way they tell the story. The burden of such storytelling is not only to tell why people are doing what they do; the story also implicitly contains some view of the morality of their action. In any society there are different perspectives and a good society brings these into some public arena where they can be explored and negotiated. This is what we are now experiencing with regard to Iraq and it shows that such storytelling is central to

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human purposes. I would argue that there is no more important factor in deciding whether we go to war at present than the story we come to accept about these things, because stories give all of us reason for action, including reason for war.

In a similar way, our lives are shaped by the stories that we tell about ourselves. ¹ Next time you do something significant, ask yourself why you are doing it; your reply will make reference to some aspect of your story. No one is more truly lost than the person who has lost touch with the story of their own life is, because through our stories we make sense of the ongoing experiences of life, including the behaviour of others towards us. Through stories we build our sense of personal identity, our feeling of belonging to our various communities and through stories we continually negotiate truth and right.

We are, of course, referring to a slightly special type of story here. This is not the realm of stories that are just told for fun, or stories that relate only to our inner world. ² Rather, the focus is on stories that matter to the teller and in some way make sense of aspects of our human experience. These are stories that connect with us at a deep level and become part of how we see people and the world around us. Such stories, and they can be of many different genres, carry this burden of realism in that they are part of our explanation of the world and our place in it. They are culture-forming stories.

It is in this sense that the Bible can be viewed as narrative. If we are honest, we should note that the Bible actually contains very little of the type of dogmatic teaching that many offer from their pulpits. Much of the Bible is rendered as narrative. The Bible as a whole can be thought of as having been formed in a process of narrative reflection as the community of faith interpreted what was happening to them, and make sense of their experiences of life. For example, different perspectives were brought to bear on the people being carried away

into exile, just as different perspectives are today being brought to bear on the issue of Iraq. The distinctive quality of the biblical stories derives from them being told in the context of a relationship with God, who was seen as a focus for all that humanity struggled for, e.g. goodness, beauty, truth, righteousness. The issue in the exposition or telling of these stories then becomes to discern how this inspired quality affected the story and the societies that resulted.

All preachers long to be able to apply Scripture to life. For the last few hundred years most – particularly in the evangelical wing of the Church – have concentrated on expounding the relationship of the individual with God. Important though this is, its exclusive pursuit has assisted the privatisation of religion. It has also meant that much of the Bible has fallen out of use or been hopelessly allegorised. It has resulted in a body of ministers quite unable to relate the Scriptures to the public issues of society and our role in public life. How can the use of stories help us in this task?

So far I have outlined how stories are used by any and every society in their ongoing negotiation of truth and right. What I have not explained is that every such account of public life contains hidden beliefs, values and commitments. This is true both of religious and secular stories. Communism has its own belief structure and tells its history in their light. Doctrinaire free market thinking likewise betrays a set of commitments and renders the world accordingly. Even apparently “tolerant” postmodernism entails commitments that result in fierce denunciation of those who offend against its norms. John Locke’s vision of founding all knowledge on “clear and distinct ideas” and deriding everything else as mere “opinion” was very appealing for a time, but ultimately unable to account for essential features of human society.

We are inevitably storytelling animals. The stories I have described are a form of theory about the world and most particularly about human behaviour. They are notoriously uncertain and are continually negotiated as different perspectives are brought to bear. They function as a holistic theory, bringing into tension all sorts of elements of our existence, only some of which are accessible to scientific or logical analysis. A story appeals to others. It says, “This is how I see this situation.” At the same time it says, “This is how I see the world, step inside.” There is no reason why people of faith should not offer their own stories into the public arena on this basis. Likewise, these stories can appeal to the community at large both as the right way to view a particular situation and also as an invitation to its hearers to enter that worldview and believe in the God who gave rise to the story. So how do we do this? Particularly, how do the Bible stories we tell relate to our society? Human beings have not really changed much over the last few thousand years. Our deepest level motivations remain

the same. The way we form societies and work with power and trust, our yearnings for success and our debate about what that really means, are all the same as ever. When people look to study the Bible on a modern issue they too often conclude, “There are no references to climate change, Enron or globalisation, so the Bible has nothing to say about these things.” What they fail to notice is that all these issues concern aspects of human behaviour that are as old as the hills and which are present in the Scripture stories.

Francis Fukuyama’s widely-acclaimed book, *Trust*,³ sets out how human societies have always worked with forms of trust and how this has been crucial even to the workings of economics. A few thousand years earlier, a community of faith, which also believed that life could be perceived as a trust, wrote the Scriptures. This was expressed in the various covenants between the people and their God, and led to a moral and legal system that naturally exalted trustworthiness and denounced all falsity and corruption. The stories of that community remain directly relevant to public life. We need to hear the prophetic denunciations of corrupt leaders and market dominance, to hear of the virtues of character and of processes that build trust between people. Such stories resonate powerfully with so many of our modern issues and might be a real contribution to debate as we feel our way toward a truly international society.

Likewise, every individual and community naturally seeks to be successful on their terms and against their definitions. Scripture tells a story of “salvation history”, whereby the community interpreted the events of their life in terms of the gracious hand of God leading them on. Underneath this lay a “shadow side” story⁴ of power, conquest, ethnic cleansing, outsiders, cries and struggles of the alienated, and a growing realisation of the love of God for all peoples. Dare we tell these stories from the dark side? For most preachers this is the moment when we allegorise or skip to the New Testament, but we do so at the cost of making ourselves irrelevant. The visions of life given us by Christ only make sense when they are painted against the background of the real life struggles of the rest of Scripture. If we dare to own up to the difficult stories of the Bible, we will find ourselves in a place of relevance, a platform from which we can build toward a fuller vision of God.

Many parallels can be drawn which declare the relevance of biblical stories. The purpose of doing this is simply to plot the Scripture story into the life of today. One story that I have used this year concerns Ellie Hobeika, one-time commander of the Christian Maronite Phalangists, who led the massacre of Sabra and Chatila in Beirut in 1982. In parallel with this I tell the story of Joab (the commander of the army of David), a ruthless and self-interested person who finally received his come-uppance; his role, political situation and motivations were

all similar to Hobeika's. Once we are seen to be clearly relevant, we can then talk about how our theology helps us toward a better vision than that of the ruthless political machinations of David's day. I also recently heard an example of a person bound by an Albanian code of hospitality, who took in a perceived enemy and whose house was then surrounded and burnt by the people of the village. It was an obvious parallel to Lot in Sodom (Gen. 19). I also heard of a Chechen refugee, who was a singer, but when called on was in such grief that she could not bear to sing her own folk songs. I heard echoes of Psalm 137, "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"

The next phase is to harness them toward vision. This should not be rushed. We need to let ourselves become truly uncomfortable at the sometimes-shocking relevance of the Bible story. Yet, for the preacher, the difficult story can be made into a positive experience by placing it in context. A few words at the beginning about the place of the story in the whole biblical revelation can allow both the particular story to force relevance and a bigger vision to be served. Alternatively, another biblical story can be used to illustrate a tension or growth in biblical understanding. For example, I have sometimes used the story of Samuel's insistence on ethnically cleansing the Amalekites, but try to set this in context by also telling Jonah as showing God's concern for the hated outsiders. One can then point on to the Christian vision of a faith for "every tribe and nation and people and language". In a similar way, I have sometimes used a string of extracts on the theme of success, beginning with the simple success theology of Psalm 1, the questioning of Psalm 73, the agony of Job, then to the cross and the robust vision of Romans 8.31 ff. I am looking for someone to develop a similar sequence regarding women, beginning with some of the terror texts with their abuse of women and working through Scripture in the development of a better vision. It can be done. I suspect this kind of approach can be used on a whole host of themes or issues.

For the preacher, "telling" a story, whether it be from today's world or the Bible, is going to be a powerful, personal experience. Bible stories can be told in a host of different ways. I often use the actual text,

adding nothing. But in some situations one needs to use imagination and construct the scene. There are lots of variations, but "telling" a story is a wholly different experience from reading it. For the teller, it means looking at the text in a new way, dwelling in it, imagining it and feeling it. It is a spiritual discipline. Stories of the Bible that we have learnt to tell will become part of us and communicate God to us in a new way. For the hearer, the telling of a story means eye contact and communication at a level that is not just intellectual, but which reaches the whole person. I am convinced that storytelling of the type I am suggesting has great potential, not only for engaging with people on matters of public importance, but also in communicating truth. I am also aware that I am only just beginning to tap into this. I invite you to join me in the exploration.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ D. Taylor, *Tell Me A Story: The Lifeshaping Power of our stories* (Minnesota: Bog Walk Press, 2001).
- ² The "fairy" story is thought to relate powerfully to the emerging psyche of the child. See B. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* (London: Penguin, 1991).
- ³ Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (London: Penguin, 1995).
- ⁴ R. Mason, *Propaganda and Subversion in the Old Testament* (London: SPCK, 1997).

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