

CREATIVITY IN THE USE OF BIBLE TEXT – THE REVD DR CHRIS SUNDERLAND

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MANY READERS OF *THE BIBLE IN TRANSMISSION* WILL BE WORKING WITH BIBLICAL TEXTS CONTINUALLY.

The challenge to be creative and fresh can feel unceasing and it may even be hard to find space to step back and think about what we are trying to do. The idea for this article came from David Spriggs. He thought it might be interesting to trace the origins of a creative process, to explore how at least one person was working with the Bible and he asked me to lay out how I came to produce a piece called 'The Prodigal Civilisation' that I wrote last year. I have hesitated in this task for several reasons, not least because commenting on one's own work feels like a strange thing to do. Anyway, here goes.

'The Prodigal Civilisation', a retelling of the story of the Prodigal Son, makes reference to a society that squanders its inheritance in terms of the earth's resources. It was written not to be read, but to be told in public as two parallel stories, with the original text interspersed with an interpretive environmental application. It runs like this:

There was a man who had two sons.

There was a God who, over thousands and millions of years, made a great creation, with a whole host of creatures upon an earth. And there came a time when one of those creatures came to understand themselves to be special in the eyes of God.

And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father give me my share of the inheritance that is due to me.' And he divided his living between them.

And the humans said to God give us our inheritance, and they plundered the earth with mines and drills and rigs, sucking out the black treasure, consuming it in their machines and spewing the gas into the sky.

Not many days later the younger son gathered all that he had and went on a journey to a far country, and there he squandered his inheritance in loose living.

A great economic system arose fuelled by deep level passions, based on conspicuous consumption and using the black treasure. The people travelled everywhere and nowhere. Forests were destroyed. It was party time. The air was filled with [pause] laughter. But the clouds were gathering.

And when it had all gone, a great famine arose in the land and he began to be in want. So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed the pigs. And he would gladly have eaten from the pigs' trough because he was so hungry, but no one gave him anything.

It was the climate you see. They hadn't thought of that. And once they had, it was too late. The animals and plants began to disappear. The desert spread. The wells

grew deeper. Water [pause]; anxious people [pause]; angry people [pause]; violent people. The rich built castles. The poor made battering rams.

And then he realised his error. He said, 'Why even my father's hired servants have bread enough to spare, but I perish here with hunger. I will arise and go to my Father and say, "Father I have done wrong against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son, treat me as one of your hired servants."' "

And a few began to dream of a home, they saw a vision of God surrounded by the creatures of the earth. They dreamt of living at peace with God and the creation and they set out to make that real.

And he arose and set out for his father. And when he was far off his father saw him and had compassion and ran and embraced him.

And I will leave you to fill in the rest of the story.

How do you respond to the retelling of the parable? It has been published in a number of places and many have clearly appreciated it when it has been told, but however others may judge it, perhaps it can serve as an example of working with biblical text creatively.

I would like to begin from the most general point of view and ask what do we mean by this word 'creativity' that is on everyone's lips today and where does it come from? It may be that the heart of creativity is the ability to make new associations, to break out of established patterns of thought and make something that feels fresh. This is not to be seen as some entirely intellectual process as if it is only accessible to the super-rational. More often creativity may be marked by an integration of the world of feelings with thinking and the authenticity of the product may be most obvious through an emotional as much as an intellectual route.

This holistic pursuit then arises out of the complexity of a whole person. For that reason it is not possible to discuss the origin of even the most trivial piece of creative work without knowing the originator of the piece in some depth. Hence my discomfort in writing this article!

The backdrop to 'The Prodigal Civilisation' is the background to my own life, converted and raised in evangelicalism, embracing the discipline of daily Bible study founded on the belief in the Bible as the central reference point of an authentic faith. Theological training and practice as a Church of England vicar in a tower block estate in inner city Bristol led to a realisation that much of my inherited ways of thinking and practice were simply not cutting the mustard with today's society. I longed to discover a faith that applied not just to the world to come, but to now, to people's lives and the public life of our society. I studied some more, delved into the Enlightenment and what it had done to our ways of thinking and began to read the Bible with fresh eyes.

It was about that time that I discovered storytelling. The Bible Society's Telling Place project was creating a stir. 'Telling' stories clearly related to people so much more powerfully than conventional exposition. The 'told' story seemed to get through to the guts as well as the head and had the power to move people. Yet even here there was a frustration. No one seemed to know how to get all this out of the private world into public life. How could we read the Bible in such a way that it could speak into the public square of today's sceptical world? People would not stomach the conventional rational arguments that derived from religious faith.

Instead, we had to appeal to people, to win their interest and their concern. And story seemed to me to be the way to achieve this.

So to cut to the chase, for the last few years I have been prayerfully seeking a way of allowing the Bible to speak into the arena of environmental concern. I have become aware that Western society is deeply alienated from itself. There is an inner unease present in many people that is almost like a longing for home. One of my hobbies, that has turned into work, has been helping people trace their ancestry. It has proved an amazingly powerful tool, not only in giving people information, but almost as a form of ministry as people gain a sense of reconciliation to their past, an inner sense of belonging and almost a 'coming home'. Then I realised that in the environmental area too there was an unease. Western society is increasingly cut-off from the natural world. Urbanisation insulates us from cold and hot, wet and dry, day and night the seasons and the sounds of nature. Our great world of choice given us through technology and the market distances us from life's natural patterns. Perhaps there is a 'coming home' to do in terms of reconciliation to both the creation and the creator. EO Wilson, the famous biologist, spoke of 'biophilia' the great love of nature that seems built into the human psyche. Perhaps this is what we need to rediscover? And to recognise at the same time that this natural world and this love of it are all part of the gracious gift of the creator.

The Prodigal Son is such a famous story and almost everything that can be done with it has been done. It is not unusual, for example, for a preacher to extrapolate 'squandering his inheritance' into a whole range of fields and I know that several environmentalists have applied this text to the earth and its resources of late. I remember going to an extraordinarily inspiring day put on by A Rocha, a Christian nature conservation organisation, where the Prodigal Son was expounded and there was a clear link made to this theme. It was then I thought that this has to be put in story form. And out of that came the piece. At least that's the way I see it.

After I had written it another stage kicked in. I was aware of interrogating it. Was it okay to treat the Bible like this? How could it be justified? One of my primary concerns had been to allow the original text to be present and recognisable. I have used a parallel story form before in 'The Tale of Two Messiahs', which was a commentary on the Iraq war (available at www.agoraspace.org). This approach does allow the listener to discern immediately how you are transforming the original. Yet the extent of the transformation of the text also needs examination. What is happening here is more than a simple re-contextualisation. This is not like 'The Good Punk Rocker' as a retake of the Good Samaritan. That is just trying to retell the same story in today's cultural language. Making the connections that I do with the environment is going further in transformation – and it may be a step too far for some.

The way that I justified this to myself was to look at how Jesus took and transformed stories. I have become increasingly interested of late to realise the extent to which Jesus took up the stories of his Bible and transformed them. I read the Song of the Vineyard in Isaiah 5 and I am sure I see there the origins of parable of the Tenants in the Vineyard (Lk 20.9–16.) and of the mystical vine and vinedresser of John's Gospel (Jn 15.1–11). I read the saying in Isaiah 40 of the coming one who will 'stand and feed his flock like a shepherd' and I hear Jesus saying 'I am the Good Shepherd' and then drawing in the suffering servant picture from Isaiah 53 to speak of 'the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep'. If these relationships betray anything like the creative process that went on in Jesus' mind then it is clear that Jesus has radically transformed these Scriptures

and given them new meaning with regard to his own message and purpose. So what of the Prodigal Son? Where might that have come from?

I was at an emerging church conference one day when I met a colleague from the Church Missionary Society. I mentioned that I had been doing some work on the Prodigal Son. He said, 'Ah, but you know where it comes from don't you?' 'No,' I replied. 'Think of the themes, inheritance, going away, return, come on,' he said, 'you are a storyteller, you must recognise it.' He teased me like this for ages. I got quite cross as I struggled to realise his drift. It was as I went home that night that I saw it and when I did it was so obvious. The Prodigal Son story may actually be a retelling of the story of Jacob and Esau. There is an enormous amount of thematic overlap with Jacob – away with his inheritance; leaving a brother; alienation of brother, etc. The return even follows a similar emotional trajectory as the wanderer returns so hesitantly to be greeted with hugs and kisses. Yet there the similarities end. The Jacob and Esau story was traditionally told to justify the fact of God's blessing on Israel (Jacob) as opposed to Edom (Esau).¹ yet by focussing on the return rather than the setting out, Jesus turns it into a story that is commending a new sort of inclusion and reconciliation. At a deeper level, Jesus also changes the characters so as to put the father in the place of welcome and so opens up the possibility that the story be read in the biggest picture terms as the reconciliation of the human with God.²

With that in mind, my own defence of this treatment of the Prodigal Son would likewise hinge around a move to a new sort of inclusion, namely, a view of the world that moves beyond the anthropocentrism that has beset so much of our thinking about the good news, to include the creatures of the earth. It also evokes a bigger picture of reconciliation in terms of a homecoming that involves a new harmony with the earth and its creatures. I am of the view that both of these ideas are actually scriptural in themselves and can be derived from the biblical dream of Shalom. I hope to develop that thought in due course.

So there it is. Something about me, something about the various strands which I am aware went into producing this piece of work and some thoughts about how we justify this sort of treatment of the Scripture. I hope they are of value and I pray for us all that we be inspired in our working with the Bible. The challenge that remains with me and that I would pass on to you is that we really must learn to apply the Scriptures to the public issues of today's world.

NOTES

1. See Malachi 1 which includes, 'I have loved Jacob but I have hated Esau.'

2. Editor's Note: The idea that in this parable, Jesus is retelling the story of Jacob, is developed fully by Kenneth E Bailey in *Jacob the Prodigal: How Jesus Retold Israel's Story* (Downers Grove, IVP/Oxford, Bible Reading Fellowship, 2003).

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