Sharing stories

Narratives, reconciliation and public theology in Ireland and Britain

Glenn Jordan & Pádraig Ó Tuama

Glenn and Pádraig are both members of staff at Corrymeela, Northern Ireland's oldest peace and reconciliation organisation.

In the next three years a number of significant civic events will be marked across the island of Ireland, as well as in Britain.

- On 29 March 2019, the United Kingdom (that is, England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and associated islands) will, as things stand, exit the European Union.
- On 31 December 2021, the partition of Ireland will mark its centenary.

The Brexit referendum campaign in June 2016 and the subsequent triggering of Article 50 in March 2017 did not just set the agenda for the UK government for the foreseeable future. These momentous events have also exposed ruptures and fault lines in UK society and reignited tensions in relation to the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

For decades, the tumultuous relationship between Britain and Ireland, and in particular the question about the rightful leadership in these islands, has been noted. People from various groups hold different parties to blame. In addition, public imagination about this dynamic of *blame* is also communicated as a singular, i.e. that to hold the 'other' to blame means that there is little-to-no blame to be apportioned towards your 'own' side. Notably, some people think the troubles around the Irish border are merely *Irish* problems, not noting the truth that 400 years of British–Irish relations have distilled themselves mostly into six small counties in the north of the island of Ireland, the story of which reveals the grander stories of the diverging British and Irish projects of the last half millennium.

In this dynamic, religion has been complicit, not curative. Religion in Ireland – most often used as a marker for those loyal to either Britain or Ireland – has been an important signifier for a society that has torn itself apart in the name of safety, power and territory for *some*. The religious imagination in our history has been limited: it has perpetuated a binary approach that implies that in order for one group to feel safe and at home, to enjoy belonging, their supremacy (in language, politics, religion, access to power) needs to be supported. To participate in this binary approach denies the generosity and self-giving nature indigenous to the Christian texts, and – on a fundamental level – excludes the kind of love that is the call of all participants in the Christian faith.

In the Irish peace project of the past 20 years, the voice of religion has been steadily decreasing in volume. However, many of the resistances to a greater mutual flourishing on both sides of the border are justified by an uninformed and ungenerous reading of Christian adherence. One notices this on levels of political leadership (our politicians are noted for using their adherence to religion for not engaging with those they consider the *other*) and on grassroots levels (one can detect dynamics of both Protestant *and* Catholic superiority in young people, who may not be devout, but whose readings of religion lead them to exclude the other).

Corrymeela has always found itself active at those places where the tectonic plates of conflicted communities threaten to crack and split apart. The situation post-Brexit on the island of Ireland and in UK society as a whole is a natural space for Corrymeela, which has dedicated itself for more than 50 years now to the healing of fractures and the building of new and healthy relationships in the aftermath of trauma. Corrymeela's mission is to *transform division through human encounter*. Begun in 1965 by the Presbyterian chaplain to Queen's University Belfast, it has been a place of gathering for people across (and beyond) Christian boundaries to engage with each other on the difficult differences that have caused murder, sectarianism, diminishing social capital and a lowering of religious integrity's witness towards social justice.

In 2018, as we approach the next three years of change and civic remembrance, we are engaged in a public theology programme that addresses some of the original sins of sectarianism at the heart of how religion is communicated and is powerful across the island of Ireland, even in those who do not consider themselves to be devout.

One element of this programme is an island-wide conversation on borders and belonging orientated around the book of Ruth.

We seek to enter into the conversation, or the silence, in faith communities in relation to Brexit and our borders not to re-run the referendum nor to apportion blame in our ancient differences, but to ask ourselves what kind of a society we aspire to for the future. In doing so, we are introducing the sacred text of our Christian communities as a serious conversation partner, because this seems the sensible thing to do when we acknowledge that among our communities there will be contrasting views. Putting our shared text at the centre enables us to navigate the complexity and the pain of the conversations we need to have and also contributes to a recovery of confidence in our distinctive voice in the public square.

The book of Ruth

Now the book of Ruth would not ordinarily be a book to which we would turn for wisdom and insight on complex issues like the ones we face here today. The stereotype we often carry is that this is a romantic book of the young, beautiful woman fallen on hard times who meets a good man, they fall in love, get married and have children or at least a child. Of course, there is some questionable activity implied as the heroine seduces her soon-to-be husband but, by and large, this can be glossed over and at least it is tasteful, though only barely.

Perhaps the most well-known part of the story is the transcendent declaration of loyalty on the part of Ruth who commits herself to her mother-in-law to go where she goes, live where she lives, to worship Naomi's God in such a way that only death would part them.

As we engage deeper with the characters and their lives though, there are other profound things which reveal themselves – like the mystery of relationships between women; like the trauma of surviving one's children, of childlessness and marriage and patriarchy.

putting our shared text at the centre enables us to navigate the complexity and the pain of the conversations we need to have

As we think about our islands, the story features a number of border crossings. Elimelech and Naomi and their boys leave Bethlehem (due to famine) and move to Moab (the place of the traditional enemy) and fall on hard times. Later, when circumstances change and a dispirited Naomi seeks to go home, the situation is reversed for the principal characters. Ruth becomes a woman in a man's world, a foreigner in a country that does not like her sort, childless in a society that required sons, a widow in a family-based culture, and poor in a community that lacked a safety net. This island, north and south, and these islands, east and west, have frequently been the places of border crossings, not all of which have been chosen – some have been forced. However, our stories are intertwined.

In the Hebrew Bible overall, the book of Ruth can be read as a form of counter-narrative to Ezra and Nehemiah, telling a story where ethnic and religious purity is perhaps not as critical to citizenship as they might have claimed and, in doing so, it opens up a debate about the nature of belonging. The book begins the process of challenging stereotypes and invites the reader to consider a new account. As the story opens embittered Bethlehamites might perceive Moab as the proper place for mean and tight-fisted Elimelech during a famine. However, as the story proceeds the reader must face the uncomfortable prospect that Moab offers hospitality to the family, the widow Naomi finds a lasting home there and her boys find wives.

Ruth and Orpah continue to care for their mother-in-law even after the deaths of their husbands when tradition would dictate that their marriage contracts were ended. Indeed, by not leaving Naomi then, and continuing to live with her they are, to all intents and purposes, acting as if their marriage contracts were still in effect. They were entitled to reclaim the contract sum or dowry from Naomi and return home, but they refuse. Naomi has to plead with them and only then does Orpah turn around. However, Ruth professes profound

NOTES

1. C Mitchell, *Religion, Identity and Politics in Northern Ireland: Boundaries of Belonging and Belief* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).

loyalty and commitment to her widowed mother-in-law in language that remains deeply moving even today (Ruth 1.16-18).

Boaz redraws the stereotypes still further by drawing attention to her loyalty and care for Naomi in language reminiscent of that used of the patriarch Abraham and even of God (Ruth 2.11–12; 3.10–11). The women of the town witness to something similar (Ruth 4.15).

The final evidence that the stereotypes have been undermined and a new understanding of community has been created is the inclusion of the family line of Perez. First, we should note that, ostensibly, the whole purpose of the marriage between Boaz and Ruth was to preserve the family line of Mahlon and through him Elimelech. However, the list only mentions Boaz and is silent on the position of Mahlon. Secondly, and perhaps most significantly, we must reckon with the uncomfortable fact that the great king David has a Moabite in his bloodline. The self-understanding of the nation has extended to include a foreigner even in the line of succession for royalty, much as our recognition must grow that our nations and identities are as mingled and as complex as any in the story of Ruth.

so often, in situations of conflict, the 'true story' is contested

Narrative practice

In the task of reconciling peoples on this island and between these islands the telling of new stories of one another and the redrawing of stereotypes is an ongoing challenge. At Corrymeela we are continually challenged by the fact that so long ago a storyteller dared to step into the contemporary social, community and political challenges of the day. We are also reminded that the art of storytelling can make a difference. To take history, politics and religion seriously is to take the ways in which people story themselves in situations of division. In order to take story seriously, we must examine its syntax, its premise, the levels of truth at the heart of a story told. 'I haven't slept a wink since my son was murdered in the 1970s', a person in Corrymeela said. Do we counter this with evidence of a five-minute snooze? Or do we explore the narrative truth in this and reckon with the impact that violence has on every individual affected by violence?

At Corrymeela we run Storywork seminars, helping practitioners (chaplains, clergy, counsellors, social and youth workers) mine the depth of narrative truth, engage in narrative methodologies that can help us share our strangeness, our story-worlds, our stories used for languaging the unsayable. In the book of Ruth, a storyteller chose to intervene into political divisions between Israelites and Moabites, and between Israelites themselves, with a narrative that embodies the stories of these territories in the lives of two displaced widowed women, each a foreigner in the other's territory. To stage a narrative intervention demonstrates the power of story: there had been centuries of distrust between the peoples divided by stereotype and resentment. Now in the brave and strange characters of Ruth and Naomi, we see people emptied by grief but nonetheless filled with courage, who intervene in the narrative development of civic life finding a place in the genealogy of kings.

In Jewish liturgical tradition the book of Ruth is read at the feast of Pentecost alongside a reading of the ground-shaking, history-making events of Sinai. It is fascinating to speculate on the purpose of this liturgical twinning. There are fewer more cinematic and spectacular stories in the Hebrew Bible than that of Sinai and the giving of the Law. The mountain shakes, the trumpets blast, the clouds conceal and the very ground beneath their feet is unstable – and through it all God speaks.

Then there is a story of three widows who struggle to survive in foreign settings, but who, nevertheless, live out an ethic of kindness and compassion and find it reciprocated by those they live among. Jewish liturgy thus preserves the significance of the ordinary lives of individuals alongside great world-making events and dares us to find ways of making personal what could otherwise be overwhelming and defeating.

The book of Ruth challenges us on the issue of welcoming the stranger; on redrawing our stereotypes through encountering those who are 'other'; on finding the gaps where compassion can thrive in the midst of technical debates about law and tradition; on carrying losses that cannot really be grieved. It presents us with questions of how to protect the rights of vulnerable minorities, particularly those who are politically and socially marginal to the mainstream, and also the responsibility towards the poor of those who are financially and socially secure.

The story features those who are forced to migrate to another country because of poverty or famine and encourages communities to face the question of what constitutes national identity and belonging to the tribe. In doing so, it throws together two people groups, Israel and Moab who have their own contrasting histories of hunger. The story opens with Bethlehamites, residents of the house of bread, reliving an element of their history with starvation and malnutrition, and also facing their historic dependence on another people who previously refused to meet them in their need. The memory of their history no doubt still had the capacity to sting, much as wounds of the history of famine are still raw in these islands. But as the

book of Ruth unfolds it challenges the traditional stereotypes and dares residents of Bethlehem to hear a new story of their traditional enemy.

Biblical literacy

So often, in situations of conflict, the 'true story' is contested. We have, to use the words of Claire Mitchell, 'Conflict about what the conflict's about.'[1] Corrymeela's practice has been to engage groups in narrative work to understand the anthropological and artistic depths of truth-telling in the stories our communities tell. This can be comforting but also challenging. To have believing attention paid to your story in the presence of people whose backgrounds, lives, politics and religious adherence represent the unbelieving 'other' can be transformative. It is also confronting. Each is brought into a dynamic of being transformed towards the other in a narrative exchange: new information is shared; new background is understood; new motivation is uncovered; new impact is laid bare.

In religion-affected conflict zones the practices and texts of faith are often commodified into symbolic markers that affect division not reconciliation. Corrymeela's practice has often incorporated a deepening of biblical literacy: taking texts that would have been used to divide and using them to enrich debate, difference and dignified exchange. The biblical texts are wild, strange and transcendent. Often, using such a methodology does not establish common ground, but creates a ground on which our strangeness towards each other can find a meeting place. We do not find ourselves agreeing, but we find ourselves meeting, and such meeting can establish – or deepen – a trust that can move difficult and divisive differences into more fruitful ground.

Some see civic reconciliation as secular ground, hoping for a great reconciliation with our Creator. For Corrymeela, we are not so much focused on the *hereafter* as the *here*. Our corner of the ecumenical field is an incarnational corner: we are interested in how relationships can be built to affect civic change in the here and now. In a project shared with many other communities and church bodies across Ireland and Britain (www.spiritualityofconflict.com), we provide resources for people of the Christian faith to explore conflict resolution through the lens of the Sunday lectionary gospel texts.

Conclusion

We story ourselves. We do this through religion; through politics; through the narratives that have destroyed us; through the narratives that we have survived. What is needed in this is a narrative sensitivity that may orient us towards the sustaining forces at the heart of our stories. This is confronting work and comforting work. The Christian and Hebrew Scriptures deepen the practice of repentance: changing your mind or direction. To engage with the other – especially in a situation of difficult difference – requires a conscious openness towards change in the reality of a human encounter with a person whose story represents a hitherto ignored or unbelieved reality.

As Ireland faces into the centenary of the partition that has marked us – and faces into the uncertainty of Brexit, which also strikes us – the peoples of Ireland and Britain are invited into an examination of the stories that will affect our civic, bordered, political, religious and relational realities. These realities invite deep and complicated reflection on the past, and the ways in which the stories told (or not told) of the past can affect the practice of the present.