



Telling Bible in a prophetic age

Stories have an important place in every society. They express a community's deepest views about life and how it should be lived. This article encourages us to recover the art of storytelling as a valuable discipline and hear the Bible again as a told story that can deeply affect our society.



Chris Sunderland

Chris Sunderland is a former research scientist, currently an Anglican priest and Coordinator of Agora, a charity working in active citizenship and democratic engagement. He recently launched EarthAbbey (www.earthabbey.com), a neo-monastic community dedicated to encouraging one another to live more in tune with the earth.

Since leaving my paid role as vicar in the Anglican Church more than a decade ago, I have been privileged to explore new ways of relating the Bible and the Christian faith to the wider issues affecting our society. There have been two major commitments to this quest. The first was to respect the Scripture itself and the other was to endeavour to find connections between Bible and culture that people outside of church could understand and appreciate. This article reviews some of the core elements of my current practice as it relates to 'telling' the Bible, which involves conveying the actual words of the text, with little or no elaboration, in the manner of a storyteller. Whether it has a place in an edition of this journal on the theme of 'translation' is a moot point. Hermeneutics is the discipline in which it most clearly resides, but you could say that my aim is to 'translate' the Bible into a form that our current society can hear and that all translation, as this edition is sure to point out, involves a hermeneutical component.

My interest began with philosophy. It became clear to me, through reading Michael Polanyi and Alasdair MacIntyre, that there were certain sorts of really important knowledge that could not be reached through the scientific rationalism, which had dominated much of twentieth-century thinking. It was apparent that all cultures have used storytelling, not only for entertainment, but they have also used certain narrative processes to negotiate life itself, even their most important decisions. Surveying the humanities, it was obvious that a narrative method was foundational to all historical, and some sociological, enquiry and that stories, and the appeal to the public through the construction of realistic stories, is part of the very fabric of politics.

It was then that my attention turned to the Bible and a challenge was put to me by Bible Society's *Telling Place* initiative to try 'telling Bible'. Storytelling is a long and important tradition in many cultures and storytellers were often held in honour as the bearers and maintainers of their culture. Storytelling is an art form lying somewhere between recitation and theatre. The storyteller attempts to enter into the story emotionally but refrains from full acting. Likewise the storyteller deliberately engages with the audience, using eye contact and responding to the moment, unlike theatre where there is an invisible curtain between actors and audience. Telling Bible as story in this way became a fascinating spiritual discipline. Using the actual words of the text, without elaboration, was to do much more than read it as in a conventional 'reading' in church. Telling Scripture required that the teller enter into the words, re-imagining their original context, the culture and even the inner world of the first tellers. I could see even then that this discipline was going to have an impact on me in addition to any affect on my hearers.

Many have noticed how much of the Bible is cast in the form of a realistic narrative and surmised that many of the stories would have been told to the community as part of an oral tradition before they were written down. With this in mind it is important to recognise that simply telling the words of the text cannot translate us back to the original oral tradition. There are intervening layers of editorial work imposed on the tradition and present within the written text. These are present in the text in such a way that they cannot be simply excised, even if that were thought to be a good thing to do. So a perfect reconnection with an original oral tradition cannot be

made. As a result, the demand to be faithful to the text becomes a slightly constraining discipline on the Bible teller and the Bible rendered as story in this way can feel slightly 'forced' and not quite natural to the hearer. Despite this inherent limitation, I believe Bible telling is a discipline that can be valuable.

One clue to the power of stories is to notice how they have the ability to relate so well across time and culture? We still enjoy Chaucer and Shakespeare, for example, even though we live in a very different culture. One of the primary reasons for this is that a story presents us with the inner world of the characters. Human nature has changed little over time, so we still easily recognise and appreciate the loves, jealousies and power struggles implicit in Shakespearean narratives, just as we do in *Eastenders*. This relationship to the inner world is the first key to making connections between the Bible and today's culture. I stumbled on this most powerfully in an attempt to 'tell Jonah'. Here was a little book that could be told in a few minutes and seemed eminently suitable to explore. I was also not impressed by the quality of exposition of this story as I had experienced it in church. Simple mantras about obedience collided with worries about science and the fish to produce little of any value. As I began to 'tell' the story to audiences, I first noticed its comic element. It really was very funny. The extraordinary repentance experienced by the people of Nineveh (Jon 3.5ff.) seemed so overstated as to be reminiscent of a joke. But why was it funny? It had to be a joke at Jonah's expense. Here was this terribly serious missionary, but how did he feel about those to whom he was called to minister? I came to see that he hated them. Hmm. You may not agree. That is the thing with stories. I can only say what it did to me. You must judge. Having told this story in groups perhaps about ten times and knowing every word so clearly that I could begin anywhere and just tell it, I began to feel that the time inside the fish, which everyone felt so uneasy about when they considered it too realistically, may actually be the key to the whole. Here, in the fish, the storyteller was showing us Jonah's inner struggle with God. Jonah, as I understand it, was both a racist and a missionary. And this set up a powerful inner conflict. He goes to Nineveh but, deep down, he still wants God to wipe the people out. God's words to Jonah, at the end, after the comic incident with the plant, are the punch line of the story, 'Should I not care for that great city ...?' (Jon 4.11).

So it was that I came to realise that the place to tell Jonah was in the context of a discussion about racism and immigration. So that is what I did. People were shocked. Even church groups were shocked to be talking about such things, and using the Bible in the process. But it was also appreciated.

The next clue to relating the Scripture to today's society comes from the idea that cultures have foundational narratives. A faith community like Israel, for example, had the great story of God's redemption in the Exodus from Egypt as a foundational narrative that was retold at the Passover each year and gave the community some of its

identity and purpose. This is good so far as it goes and preachers regularly work to relate Exodus to the narratives of redemption in personal and societal terms that are being experienced today. It is vital for the person of faith to discern and judge the big stories that underlie their culture. Yet it is also good to notice that we need not focus on just one biblical story. There are others worth considering.

I have spent a year or so now with the story of Naboth's vineyard (1 Kgs 21). At first sight it is a rough little tale about a king abusing his power and dispossessing a man of his land. It concludes with some bloody words from Elijah that tend to exclude it from most choices of lectionary. Yet some have suggested that for the people of the Old Testament, it was a foundational story. How is this? Ellen Davis¹ contends that the dispossession of people from their land was one of the most powerful and formational struggles in the original communities of faith. We feel the pain of it, not only in the Naboth story, but also in Isaiah's Jerusalem as he decries those who join

my aim is to 'translate' the Bible into a form that our current society can hear

'house to house and field to field' while being oblivious to the cries of the poor (Isa 5.1–8). We see further evidence of the same issue in laws about usury and Jubilee that would have been most important to the smallholding farmer, who had fallen into debt and was facing dispossession. In fact, the whole context of Leviticus 25 or the Book of the Covenant (Exodus 20–23) is clearly addressed to the situation of the agrarian community, who first expressed the faith of the people of Israel.

I have been telling the story of Naboth's vineyard as part of a sequence of stories called 'The Meek shall inherit the Earth', which relates this story to other stories of land and dispossession down the ages. In the process I have come to feel that stories about land are a formative influence on every culture. The way that we view land, its ownership, use and exchange are a pivotal piece of cultural formation around which much else turns. It was John Locke, for example, who taught us Westerners to view land as simple property. He had interests in North America and his concept of rights to ownership of land being earned through working the land suited the early pioneers just fine. Unfortunately, it did not suit the first peoples of America, with their philosophy of common ownership, anything like as well. It was a primary justification for them being driven from the land. Similarly, Alan MacFarlane in *The Origins of English Individualism*² proposed that the reason why England had led the way with capitalism was because it had developed a particularly strong tradition of exchanging land between non-kin that stretched right back to the thirteenth century. Today land remains a pivotal issue. Who has the right to say what happens to the Amazon rainforest and why? Who 'owns' the resources under the Arctic Ocean? How do we balance the conservation of biodiversity with human

Notes

1. Ellen Davis, *Scripture, Culture and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

2. A MacFarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism: The Family, Property and Social Transition* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978).

3. Walter Brueggeman, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2001).

4. To download 'A Tale of Two Messiahs' and 'The Prodigal Civilisation' go to the resources section at www.agoraspace.org

needs for food? Our perspective on land becomes crucial to these debates. It is for this reason that the telling of 'The Meek shall inherit the Earth' moves, from Naboth, to the prophets, to the Highland Clearances, to the indigenous people of Peru before returning to the hillsides of Galilee. The common denominator is the struggle with how we relate to the earth and the perennial abuse of ordinary people by the powerful. I wonder, is this a fair portrayal? Are these right connections? You must judge. That is the nature of story.

The third connection I would offer arises out of an attempt to 'read the signs of the times'. In my reflections on the human situation today, I have come to feel that we are on the edge of a massive change. For the last few years I have been deeply engaged with the environmental movement where there are a whole plethora of issues like climate change, peak oil, biodiversity, erosion of soils and shortage of water that are pointing to a coming crisis, not just for a particular nation, but for the whole human population in relationship to the earth. Word of this coming crisis is being presented powerfully by secular commentators and there is a burgeoning, radical lifestyle movement, led by the Transition Network, that is pointing the way to a new future. Yet, at heart, I believe we are all struggling with what is essentially a spiritual issue, requiring a transformation of the human heart, a new perspective on reality and a new way of living. I sense that we are a people that cannot hear the divine word that is being spoken to us today. This brings me to Isaiah.

I have been telling the call of Isaiah now for many years. I found a piece of music, Beethoven's 'Egmont Overture', which fits the mood of the opening lines. People enjoy this and are moved as they identify with the call, 'Who will go for us? Whom shall we send? And the reply, 'Here am I. Send me' (Isa 6.8). I was telling this piece at a church conference once, when my friend and colleague Steve Holmes said, 'You really should carry on and do the rest of it.' So I learnt to tell it all. And then it became painful. It is too easy to stop at the sentimental. It is too easy to impose our easy imagining on a context. It is hard to tell and hard to listen to the words of Isaiah as they go on: 'Hear and hear but do not understand, see and see but do not perceive, make the hearts of this people fat and their ears heavy and shut their eyes lest they see with eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their hearts and turn and be healed' (Isa 6.9). I found I could only deal with this by acknowledging the angst that these words convey. Here is the prophet in agony, and portraying the divine anguish, about the terrible truth that the people of his day simply could not hear what God was saying to them. That was true in the days of the exile. It was also true in the days of Jesus, and these very words of Isaiah are found in Jesus' explanation of the parable of parables, the story of the sower (Mt 13.14). Likewise, Jesus acknowledged that he stood in the line of the prophets in the story of the tenants in the vineyard (Lk 20.9ff.). It seems that Jesus and Isaiah shared the experience of the prophet in an age when there was about to be massive change, when institutions would collapse, suffering would abound, but no one could hear.

I contend that we are in such an age now. And in this context the great prophets like Jeremiah, Isaiah and Amos speak. In Brueggeman's understanding,³ these prophets shared with Jesus a similar experience of seeing what was to befall the people, daring to say it and bearing the grief in their own lives. It was through that, says Brueggeman, that they opened up a space for the re-imagination of society. We likewise now live in a 'prophetic age'. Massive change is about to come upon us and the people cannot hear. And to follow Jesus in this age may be to accept the calling of the prophet.

It is for this reason that I now tell Isaiah 6 in its entirety. I also rage against the abuse of power with Jeremiah in the outer court of the temple and bewail the injustices of the marketplace with Amos. And I try to find a context in which these things can speak to an age that will not hear.

This leads us to a final question. We may understand the big things that are happening around us. We may recognise connections with biblical narrative and have learnt the art of telling Bible, but how do we help our audiences appreciate the connections that we feel are being made by the Bible story? It is in the tradition of storytelling to keep a story 'open' and deliberately not explain it. The theory goes that a story told well 'goes off' in people at all sorts of levels. The story carries emotional as well as rational power. The least satisfactory context is therefore to tell the Bible followed by a talk in which an authority figure tells people what they should understand by it. Better, perhaps, is the method I indicated with Jonah which is to situate the telling in an open discussion about the pertaining issue and to use a minimum of explanation. Alternatively, in the 'The Meek shall inherit the Earth' connections are made by creating a sequence of stories, some biblical and others historical and contemporary, but all on the theme of land and dispossession. This method becomes an expression of the theology that underlies the sequence of stories. Finally, it is also possible to create an interweaved story where a Bible passage is told in phrases, deliberately interspersed with a parallel secular story. The teller can use a device like crossing from one side of the stage to another to indicate which story is being told. I have used this in 'A Tale of Two Messiahs' which contrasted the attitudes of George Bush Jnr and Jesus regarding war and in 'The Prodigal Civilisation', which juxtaposed the parable of the Prodigal Son with the environmental profligacy of our society, making connection through the squandering of resources and the return home to God.⁴ The advantage of this method of interweaving stories is that the original Bible story is left intact and the supervening story and the points of connection can then be judged by the audience on its merits.

So that is roughly what I do. I hope you will see that there is an attempt in this method to journey from serious philosophy to an analysis of human beings and culture, through to a hermeneutical process that can powerfully relate to an audience. Many have testified to the power of this method, but that does not make it right. I offer it to you to weigh for yourself, and use for yourself, as you can.