

# Christians Telling Stories

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Jesus has a reputation as a story-teller. He is known for his announcement of the Reign of God in stories of a merchant buying a pearl, a traveller being mugged on the road, a woman sweeping her floor. His theology had always the form of fiction. 'He did not speak to them without a parable'. This was a peculiar theological method. Whatever likenesses there may have been between the people of the Dead Sea scrolls and the first company of disciples, they did not have such a story-teller at their centre. And though there have been several attempts to establish that speaking in parables was an ordinary style of preaching with Jesus' rabbinic contemporaries, these attempts have resulted rather in some further confirmation of Jesus' individual distinction. There was no preacher like him. No one telling such stories. Paul, as a youngster, had clearly enjoyed the hebrew Exodus legend about a rolling stone, and the greek fable of Menenius about a talking stomach. But, if he is anywhere near as representative of the pharisee tradition as he claims to be, it must be significant for our view of contemporary jewish teachers that he thought it sufficiently daring in his theologising to elaborate a little allegory from the story of Abraham.

Jesus' story-telling talent has proved to be as singular in the history of christian theology. The vaster number of those who have thought it their vocation to articulate the peculiar christian appreciation of God have been as useless at story-telling as Paul. It may be, confronted by a demand for imaginative narrative, determinedly unfictionalising theologians should have claimed that 'the logical consistency which frames all dogmas into a consistent whole' is to be understood, as Leslie Stephen observed in a fine essay on 'Wordsworth's Ethics', as 'an aspect of the imaginative power' by which we harmonise our strongest and subtlest feelings. But they have not been quick to do so. Unaccountably, they have assumed that story-telling and theologising were quite different sorts of thing. Irenaeus is often counted our first 'real theologian' because he was the first with any 'logical consistency' to compose an account of God, the universe, and our inhabitation of it, but it is not as often said that Irenaeus' theology only got going once he had raised the 'imaginative power' to retell the Eden story as the tempting of a couple of children by an unsavoury grown-up.

If theologians have not been anxious to think of themselves as story-tellers, or as authors of any sort, some few of them have been quite humbly prepared to put themselves among common readers. That most interesting and attractive of recent popes, John Paul I, enjoyed a short notoriety on account of his writing fan letters to Mark Twain and Charles Dickens as well as to Jesus. But Andrew of St Victor exemplifies the usual, less modest, notion theologians have had of themselves. In the Prologue to his *Exposition of the Prophets*, he seems entirely content to be the docile reader: 'Let no one conclude that we are so puffed with vanity as to set ourselves up as an author'. But very soon there is a shift into boastful talk of 'what I have discovered', 'what he means', and 'what you may learn'. Andrew has slipped into the comfortable chair of the critic. So it has been generally with theologians.

Even Luther, who could invent a lively tale for young Hans, thought it proper to liken the theologian to the literary critic who sits down to the exegesis of the *Georgics*. And this finding the paradigm for their activity in the careful consideration of classical texts came to be the habit of theologians. They esteem themselves as neither extraordinary narrators nor ordinary readers but as critics. Benjamin Jowett's insisting that the critical method fit for the study of Sophocles and Xenophon could not be employed for the interpretation of 'the original and peculiar' writing of New Testament authors was a chief cause of this most distinguished of nineteenth century theologians being thought dangerously unorthodox. That the excitement of a classical parallel with a New Testament usage remains yet the greatest pleasure of respectable theologians is evidenced in the delicious thrill they get from Bultmann's demythologising enterprise.

This greekish tradition began very early in the history of the christian communities. James, making entry into the Church conditional on the baptizands' distancing themselves from persons who went in for uncleanness and blood, sex and violence, was taking a view of the home-life of greek theatre-goers. He had heard—of course he had not actually watched himself—that their notion of entertainment was to sit whilst an incestuous parricide put out his eyes with his mother's hat-pin. Thenceforward there is a clear line of reference, comparison, and contrast. Clement of Alexandria's writing of the christian as driven between Scylla and Charybdis, escaping only because he is, Odysseus-like, 'bound to the wood of the cross'; Aquinas' interest in the actions which *in theatris enim repraesentabantur olim*, and Aquinas Viterbo gossip, William of Moerbeke, translating Aristotle's *Poetics* whilst waiting to be himself translated to the see of Corinth in 1278; Alfonso Liguori's delicate celebration of the Lord Jesus' realisation of the divine

Apollo's shepherding sheep out of love for Admetus; Lightfoot's happy assertion that Paul is only ungrammatical 'in the same sense in which the charge may be brought home in Thucydides'; Hugo Rahner's allusive investigation of *Griechische mythen in christlicher deutung*: these are indicators of some general self-understanding of the theologian's business.

Clement and Thomas and William had no other point of reference than the culture of their own ancient world. Even Luther could not, if he had had time for such investigations, have found much in the Wittenberg libraries to help him understand any other culture. But when Alfonso was re-inventing Euripides, European Christians were very much aware of an enlarged range of comparison. Wicked Deists like Toland and Matt. Tindal had, since mid-seventeenth century, been proposing scriptural parallels with new tales of creation, exodus, and resurrection, brought home by sailors and merchants and civil servants from the East Indies, West Africa, and North America. And decent missionaries, like the Jesuit, Joseph Lafiteau, had more temperately been setting out *les mœurs des sauvages américains* as signs of the consistent whole of God's dealings with all cultures. Allowing the dignity of such story-tellings as the Hopi exodus narrative and the Nootka resurrection mystery, Lafiteau observed that 'a man will find everywhere something from which to draw advantage'. By 1737, Thomas Broughton, who made a libretto from Sophocles' *Trachiniae* for Handel's *Hercules*, had been able to collect several thousand entries of gods, rituals, beliefs, in a great range of religions, for his *Bibliotheca historico-sacra*. But Broughton still referred to Mango-Capac as 'a false god of the idolatrous Peruvians' whilst acknowledging Zeus, as he had been taught at Eton and Cambridge, quite simply as 'king of the gods'. Likewise, Lightfoot continued in his complacent attention to the structures of classical writing without even a nod to the many Indian writings which had been translated for British readers after the first War of Independence, 'the Mutiny', in 1857. When Jowett, looking at evidences of a dispute about 'faith' and 'works' in the literature of the Buddhists, wondered whether knowledge of such a parallel should not perhaps modify nineteenth century considerations of 'the great question of the Reformation', he was not at all applauded by his fellows. They were not even pausing to enquire what pagan sense of due order prompted their own terror of passing the port widdershins. But in Fr Rahner's time, those who watch the Mahabharat on television, even if disappointed that the Hindi epic offers so little in the way of sex and really not much more in the way of violence, may well be curious about a literature replete with stories of epiphany, immaculate conception, and

expiatory suffering.

Some theologians, anticipating that modern christians will be demanding a reviewal by their schoolmen of the exclusively classicist paradigms, have attempted a theological version of 'the new criticism', and even undertaken a new 'new quest' for the historical story-teller. But, more significantly, there has risen lately a cry for theologians to think of themselves not as critics at all but as members of a story-telling tradition. A cry, that is, for theologians to think of themselves in just the way that well-disposed christians have always thought of them.

Paul may have found it gratifying that the promise made to Abraham and 'to his off-spring' was not 'to his off-springs', and that the Genesis text could be persuaded to declare that Hagar is Mount Sinai and, thus, correspondent to 'the present Jerusalem' of the jews. But christian congregations have always taken more interest in his traveller's tale of shipwreck and a night and a day adrift at sea, and in his mystery story about the man who was snatched into the third heaven. Jerome might like to think his fame in the future was assured as the critic who explained 'what has been said by others' and who put into plain language 'what is obscure in their texts'. We, in that future, recollect rather his even plainer language in his dealings with other critics. Alongside the apostolic irritability of *II Corinthians 11* and *Galatians 3*, we cherish the anecdote of Jerome's furious attack on his old friend Rufinus, not at all caring why they should be so ticklish about a translation of Origen's *De Principiis* or caring about *De Principiis* only because of their anecdotal anger. Even Jerome had his doubts about the value of his critical, classical, enterprise. There was a nasty nightmare in which Christ accused him of being merely 'ciceronian'. Luther, however frivolous he thought the *fabulator* Aristotle, took Cicero to be an acceptably earnest model for the christian critic. His 1519 *Operationes in Psalmos* open baldly with a definition of the theologian as grammarian; his 1525 Preface to *Romans* starts with the chilling advice, 'our first business is with terminology' ; in the 1528 commentary on the *Psalms*, Luther actually hits out against the 'Passionels', in which were collected stories of the suffering of martyrs, and, indeed, against 'all legends of the saints' and 'other improving stories'. This from the man who had himself told the wondrous story of his desperate alienation from the order of creation and the surprise of his release in 1514, when 'I entered Paradise through open gates'. It is a great sadness that the man who had been held in the solitary confinement of *Romans 1.17a* should have continued to practice half-verse criticism of the old sort. The Wittenberg divinity school produced graduates like Hamlet, skilled in the deployment of grammatical antithesis of the 'to be' or 'not to be'

kind, yet hankering after old stories of St Patrick and purgatory.

Whatever the reverend value of their precise criticism of 'words, words, words', Paul, Jerome, Luther, remain in christian conversation as the storm-tossed sailor, the irascible old cardinal, the self-imprisoning loner. It is in the repetition of their stories that their spirits are still being handed over. And it is a Hamletic hankering which prompts those still interested in the 'more things' in heaven and earth to make their present call for 'narrative theology'.

They are appealing to the earliest written expression of our christian tradition. The whole structure of gospel is of a narrative sequence of coadunative narratives. Whatever traces there are of dominical verbal niceness in the discussion of 'sons' at Psalm 82.6 and 'Lord' at Psalm 110.1, the gospels witness to the theology of 'it is written' being abandoned at the story-telling of 'There was this man. . . .' In the retellings of Jesus' stories and of stories about Jesus, the communities discovered their proper character.

The gospels witness, also, to story-telling as self-discovery. Within the local church's sense of who Jesus is, the evangelist is expressing who Jesus is for him. The good scribe, 'who has been trained for the Reign of God', will bring out, as Matthew smilingly suggests, 'what is new with what is old'. What is 'new' will include what is peculiar to the present story-teller.

And they witness to a necessary awareness not only of self and community but of women and men outside the church. The evangelist was a cheerful reader, as sensitive to the narrative opportunities in the outsiders' literary tradition as to the resurrection life of the christian community. So now, with their materteral talent for story-telling and their care for moral and dogmatic orthodoxy, those who would practise a narrative theology must engage in such evangelical reading.

*Matthew*, evidently, is the work of a man who could be excited by a single word of the hebrew literature. But he is excited not by the curiosities of linguistic analysis, grammatical gloss, or dogmatic condemnation, but by the possibilities of telling a story. Coming across a 'son' at *Hosea* 11.1 who is called 'out of Egypt', he is ready to develop a whole history of a flight into Egypt so that Jesus may be that son and hear that call. Rummaging again in the scribal cupboard he learns what was going on in Egypt. Matthew fetches out the commentators' reference to the baby Moses being offered a choice in Egypt between a lump of gold and a thurible of burning myrrh and frankincense. Some foreigner, therefore, must have given the child Jesus gold and spices. So Matthew knows where he should place the story of the wise men.

*Luke* exhibits the story-telling promptings of greek rather than hebrew literature. His sense of Jesus is shaped by the remembered fun of reading Homer in his schoolroom. *Luke* appreciates Jesus as the heroic journeyer setting his face as firmly towards Jerusalem as Odysseus set forward to his home on Ithaca. The body of this gospel is given the structure of a journey narrative. The sayings, parables, miracles, are recalled as incidents along the way. It is a lonely and terrible way. Like Odysseus, 'the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head'. And, like Odysseus, Jesus tells stories of what it is like to be a solitary traveller. In *Luke's* re-telling the mugged man gets no help from the critics. The representatives of hebrew theological scholarship pass by on the other side. Like Odysseus again, Jesus gets home. When he enters the Temple it is to claim 'my house'. There the final struggle with those who do not recognise him begins.

If *Matthew* owes much to the strict conduct of scribal seminars, and *Luke* to some fine sixth-form teaching, *Mark* is evidently the work of that commoner sort of person who likes to cheat when reading a detective story. The sort of person for whom 'Columbo' is the pleasantest sort of television viewing. At the very start of this gospel, the reader is told the ending. *Mark* begins by letting the reader into the secret that Jesus is 'the Son of God'. If any reader is not entirely sure what this title implies, *Mark's* first paragraph makes everything delightfully clear. This beloved Son is the new Adam in a world at whose new beginning the voice of God is heard over the face of water, he is the one who, in our present desert, resists the old tempter from garden times, the one who renews our original friendly relations with beasts and angels. Given this advantage, the reader can understand what is going on even in incidents which were a puzzle to the evangelist whilst they were happening. The reader can see, for example, the meaning of that boyish episode when *Mark* ran naked from Gethsemane, leaving his bath towel in the astonished policeman's hand. *Mark*, the informed reader knows, had been the unredeemed Adam, immature, naked, accused, unable to stay in the garden. The gospel itself, in the reader's hand thus becomes proof of what a change Jesus had made in *Mark*. The reader has every clue needed to understand what happened at Jesus' death.

*Mark* discloses that, whatever change Jesus worked, *Mark* remained his bouncy self. *John*, contrariwise, suggests an ironic, creaky, but still marvellously imaginative, old gentleman. So old, perhaps, that nervous members of his community, in their most respectful manner, were demanding a piece of writing worthy of 'the last apostle'. It may be that they pushed him into that curious Prologue, full of the fashionable tricks

of linguistic philosophers and the games they liked to play with prepositions. John was too ironically aware of himself to keep this up. He very soon abandons 'in' and 'through' for the plainer storytelling structure of *Mark*: 'There was a man sent from God. . .'. Still, John would like his readers to know that he can manage a scholastic disputation as well as Matthew. The levites attempting to define this man are rebuffed by a nice re-punctuation of *Isaiah* 40.3. John is equally eager to demonstrate that he can throw in an Homeric allusion as deftly as Luke. In John's narrative, the risen Lord is first recognised by Mary Magdalen who, by the time the evangelist was putting his story in order, had been identified by the community as the sister of Lazarus, 'it was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair'. John recalls the *Odyssey* incident when the first of Odysseus' domestics to recognise 'the victim of enmity' when he returns is the nanny Eurycleia. She knows her Lord by the scar on the foot that she has so often washed and anointed. And, in the course of telling this resurrection story, John finds space to signal his approval of what Mark and Paul have been saying about Jesus as new Adam. Mary supposes the risen Lord to be 'the gardener'. But whatever his share in others' literary knowings, none of his predecessors read, experienced, imagined, in John's way.

The critics have been indefatigable in their explaining how it can be the man spitting outside the Temple is 'the light of the world', and the man at the Tiberias picnic is 'the bread of life'. They have learnt how to deal with the poet who receives revelation in images. But, just as it does not seem quite the thing that Milton should have made a pun in the very first line of *Paradise Lost*, so there's an inappropriateness in John's telling a funny story in the middle of his gospel of redemption. At no other passage of the New Testament is a lone reader so likely to laugh aloud as at John's grinfal account of the pharisees' interrogation of the man born blind. John moves easily among the baffled parents, cross alderman, pernickety clergy, and innocent youngsters, of that theatrical tradition which, stretching from neapolitan *atellana* to *The Comedy of Errors*, John may have known from the *fabulae* of Plautus which amused both Cicero and the grumpy Jerome. Like the caper of *Captivus*, the comedy in *John* opens into a divine peripety: 'Lord, I believe'. This piece of fun belongs together with the spritely images of light and life, and the perfectly controlled pace of the Passion narrative, in John's consistent design; each literary element conspiring towards the staggering climax: 'believing, you may have life in his name'.

Having reached his perfect ending, John found that the common readers of Ephesus were still asking "What happened next?" There was,

unhappily, still room on his parchment for some anti-climactic coda. His narrative design was about to be frustrated. Understandably, his humour now becomes somewhat more ironic. He makes a little seemly fun of those proto-liturgists in his community who say there can be but one way of having a meal in the presence of the Lord. The lakeside feast of bread and herring is celebrated in just the eucharistic language. Then, John takes the opportunity to have a dig at the pontifical busy-bodying of Peter. But, endearingly, his severest irony is reserved for his own reverend ancientness. The last apostle's great age is being used against him in the awful rumour that he is to live on and on. His friends are actually gossiping about his being kept from the Kingdom. If there had been for a moment, at the Prologue to his gospel-making, some hope that he might impress these people with an 'in' and a 'through', there is, at this Postscript, something of Touchstone's trust that a man may escape catastrophe by virtue of an 'if'. In the wryest verse of the New Testament, this most generously imaginative of christian story-tellers has resort to the precise little shift of the textual critic.

Any decent, sensitive, reader must be saddened by this panic-stricken reference to *ipsissima verba*, but John is not alone in contemplating the frustration of his literary ambition. Matthew's design was for his opening allusion to Moses in Egypt to be opened out at a *finale* in which we should recognise that Jesus has chosen not the gold of this world's royalty but the myrrh that is wrapped in grave-linen. John knew about that myrrh, Mark and Luke remembered the spices, but Matthew, in the Easter excitement, cannot stop to mention myrrh. His Jews are already talking to Pilate about the promise of resurrection. Mark's initial revelation to the reader should have been complemented by a general recognition of the Son of God at the end of the gospel. Half-way through he has to let Peter join us in our knowing, 'You are the Christ', but Mark's telling is moved along by unknowers' questions: 'Who is this?', 'Is not this the carpenter?', 'Are you the King?'. But there is no final demonstration. The story collapses into 'they said nothing'. Later editors have added 'an imperishable proclamation' and 'they preached everywhere', but Mark could not complete his narrative. The collapsing of *Matthew* and *Mark* must have contributed to Luke's conviction that he could write a more orderly account. But he, too, found the story unmanageable. He was torn between the desirable literary ending in which Jesus would be settled with his friends at home, and the actuality of Jesus continuing his journey. In his very last verses, Luke does get the disciples into 'my house' in Jerusalem, but Jesus 'departed'. And if, in the opening of *Acts* Luke manages a grander *finale* for Jesus, his disciples are now going off to the mythic ends of the earth.



Amazingly resilient, he tries to put Paul's story into that *Odyssey* pattern of eastern mediterranean misfortune. Again he is forced to leave his work most unsatisfyingly unfinished.

So now, if christians want to take the evangelists as paradigm theologians, they have to recognise, after the autobiographical impulse, the communal re-telling of the conversion story in the church hall, by the camp fire, at the goodnight parley with the children, and the organisation of the public narrative, a final inadequacy of every effort to tell their story. They must, as they speak beyond themselves in the languages of Isaiah or Homer or Plautus or Shakespeare, be already acknowledging an inevitable inadequacy of their designs.

Thus the insistence of Aquinas and Luther and Barth that any theological enterprise must 'let God be God' would be revitalised as the community's refusal to countenance any reduction of the divine to being but a character in 'my story',

With this criterion for any 'narrative theology' would be set, as the conversation moved to put the first-person account into shareable form, the further criterion of letting story be story. At this, Justin, Augustine, Bunyan, Newman, would become even more significant; Ockham, Butler, Garrigou-Lagrange, Lonergan, less so.

If the christology of 'The Dream of the Rood', the purgatorial sympathy of the *Queste del Saint Graal*, and the celebration of a virginal vocation in Handel's retelling of *Jephtha*. would certainly survive the application of both criteria, few of our later parable-mongers are worth much study. Even Oscar Wilde's *Happy Prince*, in which homosexual tenderness and redistributionist social theory are expressed in the forms of christian rhetoric, is a little difficult to swallow. This rarity of effective story-tellings in the catalogue of our theology must prompt some looking-about for outsiders' narratives. Luke's three accounts of Paul's rehearsing his conversion story suggest that after the autobiography of *Acts* 9 and the baptising community story of *Acts* 22, the apostle resorted to the *Bacchae* of Euripides for a language which should convey the Lord's meaning to the lady Berenice, who had at one time been betrothed to Philo's nephew. Fourth century levantine bishops, carting their credal baggage from synod to synod, clogging the post-roads of the Empire, saw that they might re-articulate Christ in the language of mesopotamian lore, defining a hero, wondrously born, suffering and dying, rising to enjoy a heavenly kingdom. But we, now, may well demur that we, in our attempts to read literature and theology together, lack the confident authority of the apostle and the episcopate of the patristic age. We may, as well, be rather relieved that we cannot dare, as Augustine dared at the start of his conversion story, to thrust the

dullish *James* into quick parallel with the *Aeneid*.

Well, warned by their sense of the eschatological prevention of anything in the way of complete theological expression, and encouraged by their increasingly appreciative estimate of narratives that are confessedly partial, theologians may yet be kept busy with the discernment of spirits. They may explore the possibilities of their culture's literature for future announcements of Christ. If the first two criteria reflect the necessary theological awareness of the transcendence of God and the demand within the revelation made in Christ for a story-telling response, narrative theology must also be conducted in accord with the further criterion of acknowledging the generosity of the Spirit. The accounts F.D. Maurice gives of 'inspiration' may suggest the workings of this third criterion. Maurice is still the old-fashioned classicist, but a reading of what he has to say about Lucretius might enable a modern English-reading theologian to divine what is being declared in Shakespeare's dramatic exchange of 'nature' and 'charity', in Henry James' anselmian celebration of that honour which is only to be preserved in suffering, in Leslie Stephen's 'bad five minutes in the Alps'. At any rate, I cannot suppose that a theological programme which, setting out from a reading of Jesus' parables, was aimed at a Christian appreciation of such writings alongside those of Justin, Aquinas, Liguori, and Fr Hugo Rahner's brother, say, would be a waste of redeeming time.

## **U.S. Women Religious and the Feminisation of Poverty**

**Susan Marie Maloney SNJM**

### **Introduction**

One of the most important social realities today, one which holds theological importance is the well documented and yet chilling fact of the feminisation of poverty. With the increasing global and national polarisation of poor and rich, the majority of the newly poor continue to be women and children. Overwhelmingly, women with children spend the major portion of their lives in a downward spiral, struggling for economic survival for themselves and their children. Politically, these