

The Jesus Story

When primeval man stood at the mouth of his cave as darkness fell he knew himself to be the inhabitant of a hostile environment. Life was short and brutish. Yet he survived and slowly learnt to improve his lot and to live in co-operation with others, gradually villages evolved into cities and cities into ordered civilizations. One of the ways he coped was by telling stories. As human speech developed from grunts of anger, warning, defiance, satisfaction and triumph, he began to make sense of it all by creating a world of imagination in which he saw himself as safe and successful. I use the masculine gender here in the widest sense, for the evidence is that the evolution of language and culture was as much a female as a male endeavour. There came a time when story telling became a community role, it may be that a disabled man, perhaps someone wounded in a tribal battle, found a role in telling stories around the communal fire in the evening. This role developed into a priestly role, telling stories about the tribe, inventing Gods to look after the tribe, to set a standard of behaviour, to judge and punish the wrongdoer, religion began to take shape.

All religions seem to be like that. Telling stories to enable people to make sense of their world, to inspire and judge, and to enable the community to cope with uncertainty and danger and to rejoice in times of prosperity. Behind all the little stories making up the cultural and religious content of the community there emerged the grand narrative, the big story putting all the rest into context. So, for example, behind all the stories of Israel lay the basic tale of the escape from slavery in Egypt, the struggles in the wilderness and the settlement of the land of Israel.

The philosopher Don Cupitt explains in his book "What is a Story?" that stories are fundamental in understanding how the human race developed. He points out that there came a time when all stories were somehow thought to be subordinate to the grand narrative, and once stories came to be written down and fixed in form in books and sacred scriptures they tended to lose their flexibility and to become fixed and rigid. This in turn resulted in the evolution of the huge ideologies of the modern world. The present is a time in which these ideologies have broken down: imperialism, socialism, communism, have all declined. Capitalism and globalism are the current ideologies, but their sustainability is being challenged as we speak by the growing threat of climate change and ecological failure. The phrase we use to describe this new situation is post modernism, which, among other things, means that the ideologies of previous ages are no longer part of our understanding of the world we inhabit. It is in that context that we can come to a deeper understanding of secularization. Not only has our industrial society lost its consciousness of God, but also it sees itself as part of postmodern society in which the social and economic ideologies of the past have lost their power and influence.

It is into this situation that the Christian church needs to bring its message and mission. I suggest that it can only do so if it is ready to understand the secular and postmodern nature of the world to which it is sent. There is simply no point in insisting that the world must return to open and public belief in the God of the supernatural, miracles, the power of the hierarchy and so on. One possible way is for the Church to tell its own worldly story, to affirm its identity in the face of the wider society, to establish its credentials as a caring and committed, body in the community. Let us see where that takes us.

First, the Gospels contain a number of stories that impinge directly upon our own situation in the present time. For example consider the parable of the Good Samaritan (St Luke 10 vv 29-37). We could say of such a story that it has an immediate relevance to issues of social responsibility, the welfare state, and racialism. This story therefore stands alongside many other stories as the basis for much contemporary political thought and action. But that is not enough.

Secondly, the stories in the Gospels produce a certain kind of person, committed and caring. To understand this we need to look again at what we mean by faith. In previous times faith was thought of as primarily giving intellectual assent to a set of propositions, such as the Nicene Creed. So if you said that you didn't believe in the Virgin Birth you were said to have lost your faith. However that is not the whole meaning of faith, and indeed it seems to me to be a corruption of the truth. If we tell a story – say for example the parable of the Prodigal Son, or as Biblical scholars prefer to call it the Waiting Father (St Luke 15 vv 11-24), we may touch the heart of the listener who, is perhaps experiencing some family alienation. There may be an immediate response “I want to be like that – I want to forgive my son – I want to go home and be forgiven by my father”. That is an act of faith, not simply an intellectual assent but an act of the will, a resolution to take some action, and that really is what faith is about. Another example of the power of the story is told in 2 Samuel 12 vv 1 – 14, in which King David is made to face up to his sinful betrayal of Uriah the Hittite. So what we are saying is that in telling stories – not necessarily or only Biblical stories – we produce people who are changed, they become contrite or committed or caring, and that such people have an important role to play in society today.

Thirdly, the telling of stories not only produces such special persons but it creates the Church – the Church is the association of people who have heard and responded to the stories of the Gospel. We may describe the nature of this community as being a community of affection, disaffection and infection. By affection we mean a community of love. So in St John's Gospel Jesus says:

“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (St. John 13 v 35)

By disaffection we mean a body committed to changing the world, getting involved in the struggle for justice and peace and the care of the poor and hungry. So in St Matthew’s Gospel Jesus says:

“You have my Father’s blessing; come, take possession of the kingdom that has been ready for you since the world was made. For when I was hungry you gave me food; when thirsty, you gave me drink; when I was a stranger, you took me into your home; when naked, you clothed me; when I was ill, you came to my help; when in prison, you visited me.” (St Matthew 25 vv34 – 36)

Infection means that the Church is a community that reaches out to bring others into membership. So in St John’s Gospel we read:

“Many Samaritans of that town came to believe in him because of the woman’s testimony: ‘He told me everything I ever did.’ So when these Samaritans came to him they pressed him to stay with them; and he stayed two days. Many more became believers because of what they heard from his own lips.” (St John 4 vv 39 – 41)

Nothing that I have observed so far has involved appealing to the idea of the supernatural. This is quite deliberate, we are here concerned to find a way of speaking about the Christian Gospel to secularized persons. Any reference to the supernatural is meaningless to such persons.

So we now come to consider not the stories Jesus told but the story of Jesus himself. It is possible to look at the picture of Jesus presented in the Gospels and to filter out all supernatural aspects, to concentrate solely upon his humanity. If we do that we find that we are not left with nothing, indeed there emerges a real person with a clear role and mission. Jesus is seen to be from such an analysis as a rugged character, a boy from the country who, at an early age, gathered around himself a band of followers and went about preaching to the people of Galilee and later in Jerusalem itself. He fell foul of the Jewish religious establishment who conspired with the Roman occupying power to get him put to death. After his death his followers continued his mission and founded the Christian religion, transforming the history of the world. In the Gospels the title given to Jesus by those who come to him, is that of Teacher, over and over again, 43 times in all, that is what he is called, more than any other title addressed to him. This, of course, is something quite intelligible and coherent to secularized people, all are familiar with teachers and teaching and certainly most of us will have benefited from the influence of a good teacher in our lives. Most will agree that the effect of good teaching is much deeper than simply knowing more about a given subject. A good teacher is one who helps to form and develop one’s character; when all the factual side of the teaching has been forgotten what remains is the maturity, the self-confidence, the mental

competence which has been imparted by the teaching experience. If we can say that about the ordinary teachers of our experience how much more can we say about Jesus the Teacher? The fact is that the human race is still following his teaching, and it should be our task to show that that teaching is relevant to us all in our secular society.

So what was the purpose of the good news Jesus taught? There is one text in the Gospels that seems particularly relevant. In St Luke Chapter 4 we have the story of John the Baptist sending a message to ask Jesus if he is the “one who is to come” and he gives them this answer: “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are made clean, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, the poor are brought good news – and happy is he who does not find me an obstacle to faith.” (vv 22 & 23) Like many of the sayings of Jesus each of these items is capable of more than one meaning, certainly they may point to St Luke’s teaching that Jesus had supernatural power and could work these miracles, but also they can point to a quite different set of interpretations. The teaching and example of Jesus about loving our neighbour, showing compassion to the weak and suffering, tell us about understanding Jesus and his mission in a secular situation, looking to human resources to solve human problems, calling us all to be better people. Supremely the teaching of Jesus was the breaking down of the tribalism and prejudice that were the chief impediments to the understanding of the fullness of life and humanity that the Gospel revealed to the world and which became the major effects of the ministry of the church down the ages.

These insights on the Gospel were central to the mission of Ted Wickham the founder and leader of the Sheffield Industrial Mission from 1947 to 1960. Ted learnt quite soon in his mission to the workers in the steel industry in Sheffield that which it was possible to communicate something of the essence of the Gospel to such ordinary and unchurched people by focusing on the human teaching of the Man from Nazareth, it was impossible to do so on the basis of an assertion of his divinity with all that that entails.

The last point I wish to make is that we have to ask ourselves the question what difference does it make to the actual claims of the Gospel if we do not stress to secularized people the divinity of Christ?