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Preaching on the Stories in Scripture

JOHN GOLDINGAY

More than half the Old Testament and more than half the New Testament are comprised of sequences of narratives. The Old Testament is dominated by two versions of an epic which begins with creation and takes us through the story of Israel (Genesis to Kings and Chronicles to Nehemiah). It also includes a number of shorter stories focussing on individual men and women such as Ruth, Jonah, and Esther; Daniel and Job, too, partly fit this category. The New Testament, in turn, is dominated by four versions of a new kind of story, an account of a messiah who is unsuccessfully crucified; one of these continues with a report of aspects of the early years of the church, persecuted equally unsuccessfully.

I have noted in an earlier issue of *Anvil*¹ how stories in general, and biblical stories in particular, create a world before people's eyes and ears, and invite people to live in that world as the real world, even if it contrasts with the world of their current experience. In issuing that invitation, a story communicates in a quite different way from a direct statement of what people are encouraged to believe and do. It works less directly than a straight statement does, leaving the hearers to do more of the work if they are to learn from it. Perhaps precisely because of that, it may communicate more powerfully than a direct statement does. Everybody responds to stories: hence television is dominated by them, and advertising and documentaries characteristically focus their attention on what the product does for a specific family or on how government policies affect people on a particular street. Stories are thus a key resource by which scripture communicates, and therefore a key challenge to the preacher. How do they themselves suggest we go about preaching on them?

I was brought up on that classical form of expository preaching which works by seeking to explain systematically and explicitly what is the central message of a text and how its various parts contribute to this message, addressing people's minds as clearly and directly as possible. When I learned to preach, that was the form of preaching I sought to adopt. It remains a powerful and effective means of opening up the significance of scripture, and it is vastly preferable to the three-point 'thoughts which have occurred to me and which I am prepared to attribute to the Spirit and inflict on you' which are often the fare of evangelical and other pulpits. But

1 'Interpreting Scripture', *Anvil* 1 (1984), pp 261-64.

it is mainly appropriate for the texts in the Bible which are themselves directly expository (such as the prophets, the Sermon on the Mount, and the epistles). It is less appropriate for the history/story material in scripture. A common homiletic approach to the latter is to summarize the story itself at the beginning of the sermon and then ask, 'Well, what do we learn from this?'; at which point the sermon falls flat on its face as we abandon the text's own story form and turn it back into the kind of direct teaching which those other parts of scripture offer.

I was just beginning to realize this a few years ago, and was wondering how to develop an approach to preaching which would deal better with story texts, when I came across a book called *Communicating the Word of God* by John Wijngaards.¹ It looks helpfully at appropriate ways of preaching on many different kinds of scriptural material, but it was the chapter on history/story that especially interested me. I was due to preach on Abraham at about the time I read it, and decided to try a method Wijngaards suggests, retelling part of the story fairly straight, then reflecting on that part (perhaps talking about a modern experience which might be equivalent), then telling more of the story, then reflecting again, then relating yet a further episode of the story

As I preached the sermon, I quaked at the knees, feeling I was taking people back to an old-fashioned Sunday School. Yet I do not remember ever receiving more appreciative comeback from a sermon. I proved to myself that there is a power about stories which reaches adults as profoundly as it reaches children. Like children, they will collude with you if you tell the story in a way that invites them to forget that they know it (avoiding the use of phrases such as 'As we know. . .'), so as to enable themselves to be drawn into its wonder once again.

What stories aim at

1 The commitments which the faith entails

'As the father sent me, so I am sending you' (John 20:21). Jesus's commissioning of his disciples suggests one motive which will have underlain the telling of stories about Jesus. He is the model for people who come to share his calling; as he lived and worked, so should they. Similarly, stories about Abraham or Moses, Joshua or Josiah, Daniel or Esther, Stephen or Paul, were preserved partly to offer examples for other believers called to live by faith, to exercise leadership, to withstand the pressures of life in a foreign land, to witness boldly before Jews and Gentiles. It is this function of stories which is taken up by a passage such as Hebrews 11. Stories illustrate *the commitments which the faith entails*.

Using biblical stories to provide examples of how believers should or should not behave is thus a quite biblical procedure. Yet books on preaching often protest at such a 'moralizing' approach, and the protest is 80%

1 Mayhew McCrimmon, *Great Waking* 1978; now available from 'Housetop', 39 Home Street, London W1H 1HL.

justified. This way of using stories is very common indeed (especially with children, and in family services), whereas in scripture it is much less so. There are theological and spiritual reasons for this. It focuses on God's word to people as a challenge to them to perform certain acts or to manifest certain characteristics, and this is its fundamental limitation. In contrast to it, the focus of the biblical story itself lies on what God has done for us. Taking stories as examples of what we should do or be risks turning the faith into something we do, rather than something God has done.

Perhaps the reason why the preacher is tempted to use stories in this way to a greater extent than scripture itself does is that as preachers we may be inclined to feel that we only fulfil an aim and actually achieve something if we tell our congregations what to do – they can then go and do it. Perhaps scripture gives this concern less prominence because it recognizes that when as believers we do not act or live as we should, it is commonly not because of ignorance (so that being given the right example will show us something we do not know). We need to be affected at a different level in order for our attitudes and behaviour to change. Merely being given the correct positive or negative example may not help a great deal.¹

2 *The experiences which the faith may involve*

At least as commonly as scripture uses stories to illustrate the commitments which the faith entails, it utilizes them to illustrate *the experiences which the faith may involve*. The stories are about God and the ways of God with the people of God; they show us how God characteristically relates to people like us. They encourage and challenge us not by giving us a clearer picture of what we should or should not be, but by giving us a clearer picture of who God is. The stories in Genesis, for instance, focus more on the way God deals with Abraham and Sarah than on the way Abraham and Sarah relate to God. Their emphasis is on God's purpose, God's promise, God's initiative, God's blessing, God's covenant undertaking.

Occasionally Genesis does express implicit or explicit approval of human attitudes and actions (eg, 15:6; 22:16), but this is relatively rare. More commonly it is difficult to tell whether people are doing the 'right' or the 'wrong' thing, or acting from right or wrong motives, as is reflected in the longstanding difference of interpretation of passages such as the Hagar story in Genesis 16. If Genesis saw Abraham and Sarah primarily as examples to us, rights and wrongs would surely have to be made clear. If the stories mainly function to show how God fulfils a purpose for the world, in despite of, as much as through, human actions and circumstances, clarity about human motivation is less important. It is thus natural that when Isaiah 51 comes to appeal to the story of Abraham and Sarah, it is to the story as an example of what God can do that it appeals, not to the story as an example of what human faith can achieve.

1 The objections to this approach to preaching on narrative texts are discussed by S. Greidanus in his *Sola Scriptura: Problems and Principles in Preaching Historical Texts* (Wedge, Toronto 1970); see also more recently his *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* (Eerdmans/IVP, Grand Rapids/Leicester 1988).

Similar considerations probably lay behind the telling and preserving of stories about Jesus. The burden of these is not centrally to set Jesus forward as an example of what we are called to go out and do. More fundamentally they show us what Jesus can be and do for us. In appropriating these stories, we do not see ourselves as taking Jesus's position, but as taking that of disciples (or opponents) for whom or despite whom Jesus can achieve his purpose.

To take stories as illustrations of the experiences which the faith regularly involves comes closer to their intrinsic nature, but it leaves certain problems unresolved. Not all stories embody characteristic experiences of faith. In particular, what is the purpose of miracle stories? If God marvellously delivered Israel at the Red Sea, rescued Daniel from the lions, brought back to life the widow's son at Nain, and resurrected Jesus himself from death, we cannot infer that God with any frequency acts in that way for later believers. Martyrdom may be an infrequent occurrence, but it is more common than miraculous rescue. So what is the point of such miracle stories in the Bible? What message is the preacher to draw from them? They bring out particularly clearly a question which arises with many stories, in that they do not indicate what God may do with us, any more than what God expects of us.

3 The events on which the faith is based

Such stories manifest a characteristic they share with the biblical story as a whole: they bring to life *the events on which the faith is based*. This faith is itself a gospel, a piece of good news about something that has happened. It is good news with implications for the present and for the future, but it is news about events which are essentially past. Thus John tells us that he wrote his story of Jesus so that people might come to believe (or might carry on believing) that Jesus is the Messiah and might thus find life in him (John 20:30-31; cf. Luke's explanation of the purpose of his gospel, Luke 1:1-4). In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul assumes that the story of Jesus's resurrection is important, not because it models the kind of experience of new life Christians may have in this life (though this point is made elsewhere), but because Jesus's resurrection was the once-for-all event in the past which makes certain our own rising from the dead at the End.

Old Testament stories, too, were written to bring to life the once-for-all past events on which faith for the present and for the future have to be based. The Abraham story reminded Israel that they possessed their land only as God's gift, in fulfilment of God's promise. The exodus story reminded them that they had been only a herd of demoralized slaves in a foreign country, and would still be that but for the exercise of Yahweh's power on their behalf. The Books of Kings showed how Israel ignored Yahweh's expectations over centuries, and thus explained why they had ended up in exile. The fundamental function of Old and New Testament stories is to bring to life the events on which the faith is based. They are events which will not be repeated in our experience, yet ones which remain of crucial importance for us.

Biblical stories are not limited to fulfilling one of the three aims just described; their depth may derive partly from their fulfilling several functions at once. Yet one function will usually be more important in any one story than others. The dominant point in Ruth is (I think) how God's providence takes two women through bereavement and exile and into new life (the experiences which the faith may involve), though it also makes these events part of the introduction to the story of David (the events on which the faith is based), and probably implies that Ruth and Boaz are models of caring for a widow in need and for a girl in need (and of how to get yourself a husband?!). Disagreements about the present relevance of some stories (eg, the use of Exodus in liberation theology or the use in renewal circles of stories from the gospels and Acts about healing or raising the dead) are sometimes disagreements about whether these stories relate solely 'the events on which the faith is based' or also offer paradigms of how God may act now or how we should act now.

The answer may not be the obvious one. Readers are often repelled by the stories of extermination in the past in Joshua and by the visions of extermination in the future in Revelation, taking these as accounts of what happened or what will happen. But they may not be that. The opening of Judges makes clear that Israel did not actually slaughter the Canaanites as one might have inferred from Joshua, and critical and archaeological study points away from Joshua being a straightforwardly historical work. Amos Wilder calls such narratives and visions 'sanguinary fictions' which 'reflect in the contemporary modes of the imagination men's acute sense of the struggle against the encroachments of the primeval chaos and for the viability of the human'.¹ They are not merely accounts of events on which the faith is based (past or future) but also expressions of or invitations to present faith, hope, and commitment in the context of threatening chaos.

How stories preach

1 *Simply by telling*

The gospels suggest four ways of going about the telling of a story so as to enable it to be effective. One is by simply telling it. Interpretative comments by the narrator are rare; events speak for themselves. Many Old Testament narratives work on that basis; but Mark's Gospel is the most powerful, driving, straight narrative in scripture. In this breathless accumulating chain of stories, John Drury notes a 'lack of relaxation or indulgence'; 'every incident is a summons to recognize the mystery of Jesus and to follow him'.² In this sense the story is quite straightforward in its message and way of working. Yet at the same time readers who begin trying to give themselves to individual stories in Mark find that in their

1 *The New Voice* (Herder, New York 1969), p 59.

2 *Tradition and Design in Luke's Gospel* (DLT, London 1976/Knox, Atlanta 1977), p 32.

straightforwardness they are puzzlingly opaque. They rarely tell us what to learn from them beyond what they contribute to the thrust of the gospel as a whole. Drury comments that this work in which Mark first 'took the momentous step of presenting the (Pauline) gospel of the cross entirely as history' has the 'primeval power' of something done 'powerfully and roughly for the first time' compared with the 'more elegant and digestible' work of subsequent masters such as Matthew and Luke.¹ The latter do much more of the work for their readers. There is a theology implicit in Mark's story of Jesus, but it is less overt than those of the other gospels.

The reminder this issues to the preacher is the power of the bare story. The philosophy of story presupposes that stories can communicate and convey a world without the storytellers necessarily making explicit what principles or lessons they want people to draw from them. Mark's Gospel points us towards a style of preaching which is simple, the mere retelling of a story, but which may be extremely powerful. The preacher finds it difficult to believe that the congregation will get the point and feels a responsibility to make explicit and to underline what that point is. But by doing so we may destroy the dynamic of the story itself, which gets home in power precisely by working more subliminally.

2 *Building in an application*

Matthew's Gospel illustrates a second way of telling stories, by building an application of the story into the way one tells it. Matthew contemporizes Mark in order to draw his readers into his story. This is the way he makes his story work as 'preaching', as the bringing home of a message from God intended to change the faith and life of the hearers. Mark had told a story about the disciples in a storm on the lake, for instance, a story firmly located in the historical ministry of Jesus (Mark 4:35-41). Where Mark tells about the disciples taking Jesus into the boat, however, Matthew says they 'followed' him into it (Matthew 8:23). It might have been a coincidence that Matthew uses the technical term of Christian discipleship; but he has already added to Mark's story the account of how Jesus warned one would-be disciple about the cost of 'following' him, and has urged another to 'follow' him rather than putting it off (verses 19-22). So the recurrence of the term can hardly be accidental: getting into the boat is an act of following Jesus, the storm is the kind of experience that sometimes comes to Christian disciples, 'save, Lord' is the way the church prays in crises (contrast Mark's 'Teacher, do you not care . . .'), 'of little faith' is its Lord's assessment of his followers (Mark's 'have you no faith?' is less appropriate to people who have made their initial commitment in faith) (8:23-26).²

1 *Tradition and Design in Luke's Gospel*, p 6.

2 See further G. Bornkamm in G. Bornkamm, C. Barth, and H. J. Held, *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew* (SCM/Westminster, London/Philadelphia 1963), pp 52-57.

In subtle ways, then, Matthew brings home the story's application to the life of the church by the way he retells the details of the story. Similarly the preacher's occasional sentences expressing what Jesus 'said' (ie, would have said to people like us) make it possible to keep the story form, with its potential for reaching mind, heart, and will, yet also make it possible to indicate how the story applies to us without appending another sermonette on the end of the story such as risks destroying its impact.

There is another implication of the difference between the approaches of Matthew and Mark. Mark is mainly concerned with 'the events on which the faith is based', with the Jesus of Galilee and Jerusalem to whom its readers have committed or should commit themselves. Matthew is more concerned with 'the experiences which the faith may involve' and 'the commitments which the faith entails' – with the Christ event's continuing concrete implications for discipleship. In the Old Testament, Kings is more like Mark: it is an account of how the exile came about, an 'act of praise at the justice of the judgment of God' (G. von Rad¹), not an attempt to draw detailed lessons from the distant past for ongoing life in the present. Genesis and Chronicles may be more like Matthew, retelling the story not only out of a concern that people may come to the right act of faith in regard to the events of the past, but also wanting them to see the story's implications for ongoing life (the significance for people in Babylonian exile of sabbath, abstaining from blood, and circumcision, and the significance for people after the exile of David's arrangements for the temple and of the defeats and triumphs of pre-exilic history).

3 Appending the teaching

John's method of contemporizing the story of Jesus is less subtle than Matthew's. He offers examples of something like the procedure which subsequent preachers have often used (but which is otherwise rarer in scripture itself), whereby the point of the story is driven home by direct teaching material attached to the story to bring out its theological and ethical implications. Even here, however, the teaching can be presented as the words of Jesus himself rather than as the words of the evangelist (one might compare Old Testament sermons such as that in Joshua 1), so that the framework of the story form is kept.

4 Continuing the story

A fourth form of biblical storytelling is instanced by Luke, which continues the gospel story into the life of the church, in a way obscured for us by the separating of Luke from Acts. Luke's two-part history tells not only of what Jesus 'began to do and teach', but of the events which followed his departure into heaven as the Holy Spirit comes upon the church and the gospel is preached in Jerusalem, Judaea, Samaria and as far as Rome. The

1 E.g., *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 1 (Oliver and Boyd/Harper, Edinburgh/New York 1962), p 343.

Church's story thus emerges from Jesus's story, and our story is thereby linked onto the biblical story. This process had a long history in Old Testament Israel, most clearly in the way that Ezra and Nehemiah continue the story told in Kings and Chronicles. It also probably underlies the accumulation of the history in Genesis to Kings as a whole, which was repeatedly brought up-to-date by having new episodes linked onto it, as well as by being itself retold in updated ways. The eventual result of this process which contributed to the development of the scriptures as a whole is the macro-story which stretches from Beginning to End with Christ at its centre. And because it looks forward to the End as well as back to the Beginning, it thereby actually embraces our story. It is possible to present a sermon by setting a biblical story and a modern story side-by-side, but whether or not we do precisely that in the pulpit, Luke's work offers a suggestive clue to a way we may go about preparing the sermon (or studying scripture for ourselves). We are seeking to set an appropriate aspect of our story alongside the biblical story. We are linking our story onto God's story.

How stories engage their readers

Stories engage their readers. How do they do that, and how do we enable them to do that in the retelling? The following observations are not universals, but they may be useful generalizations.

1 By their structure

First, stories have a beginning, a middle, and an end; that is, they are structured. They have a plot of some kind. We are presented with a problem which is to be solved; quite likely there are difficulties to be overcome on the way or consequences when the main events are over. In gospel stories some point in them may lead to a significant remark by Jesus, and it is for the sake of this remark as much as for any other reason that the story is told. Interpreting a story involves discovering how its plot works; it may then be natural for the sermon's structure to follow that of the biblical story. The sermon may not have a structure in the sense of four points beginning with R, but it will still – for the congregation's sake – be a structured entity (rather than a ramble), in the more subtle way that a story is.

2 By concrete portrayal

Second, stories offer a concrete portrayal of a series of events against a particular historical, geographical, social, and cultural background. There is movement from one area to another, political and religious heroes and villains pass before the audience's eyes, pressure points of economic or family or social life are alluded to or emphasized. For the story to grasp its modern hearers, the significance of these allusions have to come home to them. It is possible to convey this information in a ham-fisted way; there is no need to incorporate *all* the learning that may be gleaned from valuable works such as de Vaux's *Ancient Israel* or Jeremias's *Jerusalem in the Time of*

Jesus, and one should spare the congregation the phrase 'When I was in Israel . . .' (as rigorously as the phrase 'the Greek word means . . .!') invaluable though a visit to the scene itself is to understanding and preaching on biblical stories. But the skilled storyteller can bring to life the concreteness and thus the reality of a story by more subtle, low-key explanations of the meaning of this detail or that, in the course of the imaginative reconstruction of a significant scene.

3 By invitation to identify

A third feature of biblical stories is that they invite their hearers to identify their life and circumstances with those presupposed by the story. In this way the story makes clear in the telling that it is about the hearer as well as about the subject. Features that mark biblical stories as unhistorical often originate with this characteristic. We have noted it in a gospel story such as the stilling of the storm, which makes Jesus and his disciples use the language of the life of the church. In the Old Testament, Chronicles pictures priest and people of old behaving the way they would in the Chronicler's day. The preacher, in retelling the story, similarly encourages the congregation to see the story as about people like them in situations like theirs – not by telling them that this is so, but by using the kind of language that makes it so.

4 Focussing on individuals

In order to do this, as well as portraying the scene, the setting, and the action, the preacher may look at the events through the eyes of each of the characters in the story. One needs to be wary of psychologizing characters, imposing on the story modern interest in and modern forms of expression of the inner workings of people's minds, and also of biographizing them, since biblical stories also lack our interest in the way characters develop over time. Yet we can ask what the event concerned would mean for the kind of person involved, and how these characters would relate to each other, noting especially what we can learn from the words, feelings, and actions that are actually attributed to them; for a fourth feature of many stories is their focussing on individual people with whom the hearers are invited to identify. Luke 7, for instance, offers its hearers a series of brief sketches involving a galaxy of players: Jesus, centurion, slave, elders, friends, crowd (verses 1-10); Jesus, disciples, crowd, widow, mourners, youth (verses 11-17); John, his disciples, Jesus, crowd, recipients of Jesus's ministry, Pharisees, lawyers (verses 18-35); Pharisee, sinful woman, Jesus, guests (verses 36-50). The stories engage their hearers by offering them various characters with whom to identify. Different hearers then grasp different facets of the stories' significance – so that group meditation on a story naturally leads different people to focus on and identify with different characters, in a way that can then be illuminating for the whole group. Different facets also come home to particular hearers at different times in their lives; there is no once-for-all hearing of a story. Our task as preachers is to

open up as much as possible of the resources that lie in these various character portrayals, all of which can disclose for people aspects of the gospel. It is to help people to get into the story, identifying with characters and situations as if hearing it for the first time, so that they can in doing so respond to the gospel in the way that they must.

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