

A Sermon preached for Warwick Words Service 2014

'It is a truth universally acknowledged ... Why do we love stories?'

Genesis 1: 1-13; Hebrews 1: 1-12

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.' (Gen 1: 1)

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the world. (Heb 1: 1-2)

Why do we love stories?

In a recent episode of *Doctor Who*, The Doctor's assistant Clara is teaching a class in her school and on the whiteboard at the front are the words: 'It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.' Many viewers would immediately recognise that as the opening sentence from *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen but in case some needed a clue, one of the students is hesitantly reading out a section about Darcy, Elizabeth and Lydia. The entangled romance of Elizabeth and Darcy provides the backdrop for Clara's own emotional complications worked out in this episode amidst a deadly alien wanting to destroy the earth (naturally!)

We don't need to be fans of Jane Austen or even *Doctor Who* to know that human beings are fascinated by stories. Stories are everywhere: in films, theatre, novels, biographies, operas, gaming, comics, songs, TV, even academic texts are often couched in the language of 'story'. Why is that?

Well ... perhaps it's because they're good entertainment? Or that we're readily able to identify with characters? They certainly sell and sometimes that's all that seems to matter in our market-driven world? Or for most people stories are easier to follow than mathematical equations or a musical score? So, what's not to love – surely that's all there is to it? But we can see from the use of *Pride and Prejudice* in that episode of *Doctor Who* how popular stories are alluded to, reworked and re-told in fresh ways. They come back again and again.

So what if there's more? What if stories are fundamental to our human nature and to our evolution, even to the theological notion of being creatures made in the image of God. We get some clues in our two readings. The first is the opening verses from that well-known creation story from Genesis – itself a reworking of other, older versions such as the Epic of Gilgamesh. And then we can see how that account is reworked by New Testament writers. As we heard, the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews opens that letter by locating his version of salvation history in the near past of the prophets before reaching further back to make an explicit link with Genesis: *In the beginning Lord, you founded the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands.*

Ten years ago, in a previous Warwick Words Service, author and journalist Christopher Booker came and spoke about his book *The Seven Basic Plots: Why we tell stories* (Continuum, 2004). Booker argued that the reason why we tell stories has to do with overcoming the self and he concluded with some observations about the story of Christ, which he described as 'a perfect enactment of the pattern of Tragedy – yet turned inside

out.’ He continued: ‘It is all the individual and collective darkness of the human ego outside [Christ] which puts him to death. Yet because he has no ego to die, because he represents that deeper Self which is at one with the power which created the universe, on the third day he appears again – because he is identified with the light which can never be extinguished.’ Once again we can see allusions to the creation story of Genesis and Booker is doing much the same as the writer of Hebrews – recasting that story in the light of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection.

But rather than rolling forward through time and looking at how stories are reworked and developed, what happens if we try to peer back through time and see where they’ve come from. What is the origin of our storytelling nature and why did we start telling stories in the first place?

In a book just published entitled *Unbelievable: Why we believe and why we don’t* (IB Taurus, 2014) Graham Ward has explored the nature of belief arguing the category of belief is fundamental to being human. It’s long been recognized that just as fish swim in the sea, we’re immersed in language and can’t do much without words, but he argues that we also swim in a sea of beliefs that we’re only barely aware of. This isn’t necessarily just a matter of intellect or mind games. One distinguished neuroscientist has argued that believing and storytelling isn’t just a surface activity but arises from our physiological make-up. He contends that wordless storytelling is a natural, pre-verbal part of human evolution.

If that sounds like the cart is coming before the horse, he points out that sequences of images occur in brains simpler than ours and such images are the stuff of which stories are made and may be the reason why humanity has created story and drama. He writes: ‘Telling stories, in the sense of registering what happens in the form of brain maps, is probably a brain obsession and probably begins early in terms of evolution ... Telling stories precedes language, since it is in fact a condition for language’ (quoted in Ward p 153). In other words, human beings developed language in order to express our sequential experience of lived story and drama, rather than stories growing out of the need to find something to do with this fascinating means of communication that we’d evolved.

So as the Warwick Words Festival celebrates once again the gift of stories we can reflect that narrative in all its forms is not just an entertainment (although it is that) or just part of our economic system (although it is that as well). It is likely that stories have been part of *being* human since that which is recognizably human evolved and they take us deep into the psychology of what it *means* to be human. And they also bring us right into the midst of what we’ve been doing this morning.

Stories are fundamental to the process of symbolic meaning-making which is a universal human trait; they’re fundamental to all forms of ritualised behaviour from literary festivals to church services; and they’re fundamental to an understanding of the Divine and worship of God. Why do we love stories? Because they’ve always helped us to make sense of our world, understand who we are and show where we might experience that which is beyond us and that which we call God.

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