Christian Story-Tellers, Past and Present

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Most readers of this journal, *Dare*, as a forum for ideas, will want to involve themselves in later forums for Christian ideas, in circumstances outside of Holy Trinity College. They may be working with catechists, with school teachers, adult education groups or groups on days of renewal and so on. In all of those settings it will be desirable, at least, that those taking part should communicate well and creatively with one another. But some of those who turn up may have had little experience of faith sharing at a well-educated level. They may feel a little threatened if someone else in their buzz group has done a reasonable amount of reading in the area of theology, spirituality and religion. For these reasons, it is worth realising how diversely Christians, over the course of two thousand years, have felt they can connect with Christ, or how surprisingly they may imagine the benefits of his power in their hearts and minds. I shall have to give examples which come from my own experience, most of which has been English, European or North American, but which does include some previous time in an African classroom.

Getting into the Story-Telling Frame of Mind.

You may already have encountered one or two of the plays of Shakespeare. You will not automatically have notice the Christian aspects, which are greater in some plays than others. For myself, some study of Shakespeare has helped me to distinguish between gentle stories and ones which shake us up. The Bible after all contains both sorts. Shakespeare first all wrote most of his comedies, which are about love making mistakes, before he went on to produce tragedies, often with the message in them of 'how love kills'.

When my sisters and I were children, my mother took us to see two live, outdoors performances of Shakespeare plays. One was *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a comedy, showing how foolishly people

can behave when they are in love. The other was *Macbeth*, a Scottish tragedy about an ambitious, powerful family, a man and his wife, who were so longing for political power that they provide hospitality for their rival, the Scottish ruler, King Malcolm. And when this royal guest is asleep, they murder him. But before this killing, we are shown the appearance of three witches, a scene that tells us that this play is not about politics; it is about the drama of facing heaven and hell, of being on the path towards judgement. This spiritual drama is emphasized as something psychological, when the Porter, the doorman to Macbeth's castle, hears the knocking on the gate, which represents the closeness of Malcolm to his uncertain fate.[1]

England and Scotland at this period had been pushed and tugged back and forth between Catholicism and Protestantism. There were plots to bring in a Spanish king, and some who supported this would play games with language to gain power. This was called 'equivocation'. The Porter hesitates to open the door because power games are all a matter of cautious, devious calculations, waiting for the best moment to gain more power, and possibly rule the world. People gamble with the destinies of others. The version which I saw, as a boy, was performed in the ruins of a medieval Benedictine Abbey. It has bare rough walls with large gaps in one wall where there had once been windows. In those dark openings, the three witches appeared, lit up from below, a scary image of dangerous futures happening above our heads, whether we want them or not. The actors rode in on horses, so you could feel the energy of the competition for power close up as steam rose from the horses' skin and nostrils. This was exciting and frightening story-telling. It made us aware of our mortality.

It is one of the concerns of religious story-telling, to look at how and why there are human beings whose lives are energetically dedicated to deceiving others. My mother wanted us to imagine the conflicts which

[1] For more detail on this, see M. C. Bradbrook, *Shakespeare – the Poet in his World*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978) p. 187.

might face us as we grew up. So she also read stories to us from a few favourite novelists, such as Charles Dickens. She read them out loud, and made some changes of pitch and sound in her voice, to show us how very different those characters were in the novel. I particularly remember the book Oliver Twist because of the contrast which her voice made so clear, between the horrifying Bill Sykes, a touch, harsh murderer and a thief, and the tender-hearted, young and gentle girl Nancy, whom he kidnaps and kills. The story was set in Victorian industrial city circumstances, in which all the evils of modern city life for the poor are dramatized. When Sykes goes on the run from the police, it is a horrific chase across rooftops, until he falls and a rope catches around his neck, and he is strangled. We are being told how worthless he might be even in God's eyes. But not all stories about sin are great as Christian stories, of course. Yet we need to learn to recognise in people's voices the personalities which cause fear, and those which could bring about peace. For this instructs us, that there are both good and bad ways of using our freedom. We are right to suppose that contrasts like this also occur in the Bible.

Some Biblical Story-Telling.

We might wonder whether several stories about one character, about Moses, or David, are told more than once because more than viewpoint on God's help is being portrayed. For instance, stories about King David were told in at least two different ways. In the books of Kings, we hear about him as a warrior hero, with many fears, and also rather too many sins. But in the two books of Chronicles, he seems to be a true freedom fighter, one who creates peace for the people and never seems to make a mistake. Fearful freedom and peaceful freedom are two very dissimilar realities, even though both may come from God. A third view of the freedom given to King David occurs in the gospels, when Jesus pictures his ancestor advising his men as they travel through the fields, telling them to ignore the rabbinical rules relating to the Sabbath. It seems that for Jesus all genuine collaboration in accepting God's guidance is freedom. We can certainly wonder, as we ponder this, whether there are no bad ways of living in freedom. Of

course there are. We get a fuller sense of how Jesus' story-telling reveals God's intentions through the parables. Some are stories about weakness and strength, within which he says we should discover an invitation to a heavenly wedding feast. We are not heading to a birthday party, though. God's marriage to his people was already an Old Testament theme, an occasion for deepening love.

It would be best, in my view, to regard Jesus' intention in his call for freedom as needed in order for us to get to know our true selves better. We need to get deeper inside our hearts, to recognise whether we use the freedom which comes to us from God, as spiritual gift. We then develop our powers of loving generously, as true followers of Jesus should. We have to become aware of the outcomes and endings of our actions, in the awakening of love.

What we find in reading the gospels is sometimes not a whole story but some short sayings. For instance, "Remove the plank or log of wood from your own eye first before you expect to take a splinter out of the eye of someone else." Get a sense of proportion and reality. Since, being in Zimbabwe I have learnt a Shona proverb which is similar. "Even when you are dancing in water, your enemies will accuse you of kicking up the dust." In both sayings, we are reminded that all of us can often be impatient in pointing out the faults of others. Unfortunately, blaming people means we have prevented ourselves from loving people. We need to search further, to learn how God gives us heavenly light, to make us more genuine in our loving. Luke 11:33 copied this from Matthew 5:5, and 6:22, and from Mark 4:21. "No one lights a lamp and puts it under a tub. They put it on a lampstand. The lamp of the body is the eye. When your eye is clear, your whole body is filled with light. See to it that the light inside you is not darkness, and that your eye is not diseased." Mark tells us this very simply. Matthew tells it in two parts, and adds more ideas. We may reasonably ask, what if Matthew is adding his own thoughts; not repeating Jesus words, in fact? Sometimes Christian story-tellers in our modern times do wonder, "surely we should trust Jesus more than Matthew?" We

want to feel that we are right at the feet of Jesus, getting direct attention personally from him. We are uncertain whether his followers and their communities really understood and remembered what Jesus had intended to teach.

While we have four gospels, it is important that three of them provide us with three different versions of the same parable. Mark, Matthew and Luke all contain a narrative of the paralysed man, carried to Jesus on a mattress, to be healed. Mark's is probably the first telling recorded, Luke's the last one. Mark and Luke include the part where the man's friends lift him up to the roof, and remove tiles to lower him down; Matthew leaves all of this out. But all three say that Jesus sees their faith, the faith of the friends. Thus faith and healing are a shared communal reality, not just an individual's experience. Matthew speaks of the man being 'on a mattress' only; Luke says that 'along with the mattress,' a large object, he was lowered. For Luke, then, the healing is like being lowered into a tomb, then brought back to live, by such a great amount of shared faith. In other words, the style of the telling of the story incorporates a message about how faith happens too. Peace of mind can take shape in several ways, then. It makes itself present through forgiveness, by a process of healing, and also by means of the love of a close community.

Shakespeare's plays have stylistic, religious features which can likewise help us to appreciate diverse pathways towards peace of mind. In spite of fears, deprivation and pain, the new reality emerges and is welcomed by the audience. In some plays, such as Othello and Romeo and Juliet, forgiveness, if it is ever achieved, has to overcome jealousy. Jealousy is a great barrier to peace of mind. In other plays, such as *Coriolanus*, *Anthony and Cleopatra* and *The Merchant of Venice*, greed and malice are the social forces which need to be overcome by the power of forgiveness. Since we do not know which will be the biggest problem we shall have to face in our lives, jealousy or greed, people need a community that can help them, however strong the many pressures arising may appear to be. Therefore, the need is

for the message taught by St. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 12-13, that a body of social relationships is often discovered to be tearing itself apart. This insight began as a story from Greek and Roman societies about members or parts of the body complaining that the senators are just a stomach. They do the work, but receive all of the benefits. However, as St. Paul tells his Christian listeners, 'you are members of Christ's body; you have many roles and ways of working, but you also experience the workings of the Spirit of Christ.' You must appreciate, he suggests, that what brings peace amongst you is love, the greatest of the gifts of the Spirit. This is the section of St. Paul's letter that was used by Shakespeare to write a whole poem, his Sonnet 116.

Therefore Shakespeare does not just lament the forces seen in *Macbeth*, which produce the clashes between Catholics and Protestants. He lets the remedy, which is love, affect his late plays, six of them, which are all concerned with whether love is strong enough, and whether its reality lasts in people's lives. Will love still be present when we approach the endings of our lives, when death is looming large, an unavoidable reality in our minds? In both *Cymbelin*e and *A Winter's Tale*, death and suspicions seem, at first, likely to destroy the families in the story, and also the love which should hold people's relationships together. Then, to our surprise, as the audience of these plays, we observe that one person, a very young woman in the case of Cymbeline, who had died tragically, proves to be not dead after all, but has been brought back to life. Christian language about death and resurrection was offered by Shakespeare, as also by St. Paul, as the true focus for a more loving approach to society's future and human relationships.

Aiming to Acquire the Skills of the Story-Teller.

It is not always easy, when any of us try out the gift we suspect we may have for telling stories, especially religious ones. It can be awkward to make some sort of Christian viewpoint fit well into a particular drama that we may have pictured and planned to present. Any story about suspicions, death and fears of rejection can soon end

up like Macbeth. It will remind people of how dangerous life is. But it might not teach those who follow the story-line how deeply we all need forgiveness or compassion. When I was teaching in a secondary school in Malawi, we had a drama club. Two of the students, minor seminarians, asked me to write a play for their group to perform. They wanted a story about an orphan whose father had recently died. The neighbours were expressing suspicions of poisoning, with a strong tendency to blame the boy's uncle, a nasty, deceitful man, who now became his official guardian. It was a typical village story. A sort of inquiry and funeral were conducted, but fears that had been stirred up were not overcome. The group of young actors wanted to leave that uncertainty unresolved and powerful. We entered it into a schools drama competition, and did well. It was a lively play, with some longings in it for achieving peace of mind. Yet that reality never happens, because suspicion and accusations remained powerful, while forgiveness and love seemed very weak or even unachievable. In writing it, I was simply copying ordinary village experiences. A funeral is a religious event, but this one had no definite room in it for peace, or faith, or hope. I was dissatisfied afterwards, that this had not become a Christian story. Yet it was the story which felt most real to the teenagers who performed in it.

I had more success later, when I was at a Franciscan parish in Edinburgh, in Scotland. The primary school Religious Education teacher was worried about pupils who had made their First Communion, but who were no longer going to Mass. They did not go, I discovered, because their parents had given up going. Being at the school was not enough support for them to go. I talked it over with the teacher, and agreed to help them to improve their faith by acting out some bible stories. The account of David and Goliath was very useful, because it could be discussed afterwards with the pupils, in terms of how to cope with playground bullying (whether real or imagined). The importance of developing a spirit of supportive kindness was easily appreciated by the class. My hope was that this spirit and the views shared by the class could continue to be real for them. Later they could

decide for themselves whether regular Christian worship might be a valuable aspect of their lives of conversion, by deepening their sense of compassion.

Another opportunity for developing and sharing stories about inner tranquillity emerged during that same year in Edinburgh by means of the parish jubilee. I worked with another friar, Frank Campbell, a jazz pianist, plus some fifty parishioners, to compose and stage a musical which we called *Echoes of Peace*. This was in an area where there was high unemployment and a lot of social tensions. It was based on a number of well-known tales coming from the early years of the growth of communities of St. Francis of Assisi in the thirteenth century. Peace-making was an aim which arose and turned into projects in various ways during Francis' life. He brought calm into a feuding rivalry between the Bishop of Assisi and the Mayor. He asked his religious brothers to sing the Canticle which he wrote about Brother Sun and Sister Moon, about potential harmony between all of God's creatures. Then there was included into the musical the story which I liked the most, when three bandits, living in the Italian hills around Umbria, were sneaking into the friars' simple sleeping place to steal their food, making them angry. He taught the brothers a lesson in loving their enemies. He got them to lay out a cloth on the ground, placing bread and cheese upon it, and then inviting the bandits to share this with them, which they did. It was an act of reconciliation with God, a religious act. This musical embodied within it some very encouraging energies, for all the local people in Edinburgh who were involved. It was a part of the city with good reasons for frustration. Singing these stories in a public show strengthened mutual concern, I believe, between young and old, people who often might not have seen life in similar terms.

From Past to Present.

There are other occasions, earlier than the thirteenth century, and in later times in Christian history, from which we can pull out some surprising narratives about the importance of a new Christian

viewpoint. We may find some of them puzzling, yet they do remind us that Christian imagination will not always speak in predictable terms. Past practitioners of the art of communicating faith are not all famous names, but it is worth spending time listening to their creativity. They have tried to face those fears which make many people half-hearted about sharing some truly Christian love and mercy. Firstly, then, not long after the gospels were written, as Jewish Christians spread widely across the Mediterranean region, other versions of Christian narratives were recorded. One of these comes from second century Italy. We hear about a man called Hermas, perhaps a married deacon, travelling along the great roads of Italy until he comes to a terrifying region where volcanic gases burst out of holes in the rocks, and drift across a fearful, bare landscape close to Pompeii. Everything feels dangerous there. Hermas falls half asleep, while walking along, and is visited in his dream by a woman, in whose household he had been working as a servant. She accuses him of observing her while she took a bath, and says he has been neglecting his wife and children. He protests, and says, "I did not look" but she just laughs and says, "You did look." And your thoughts were bad ones.

So he begins to feel guilty, but then passes on those guilty feelings to his family and the members of his Church. He makes up lists of sins which could be used to accuse the other people he knows of all sorts of moral failings! An old woman appears to him then to tell him how to improve his life. She is the Sibyl, a wise woman who lives in a cave and makes pagan dream predictions when people ask for them. Then he realises that this wise soothsayer is the growing Church, with its collections of ideas about virtues and vices, a very ancient tradition. The book with the whole of this unfolding story in it is called *The Pastor*, or *The Shepherd* (that is, the Shepherd story of Hermas). This book has been a very big influence upon Roman Catholicism, read and repeated by lots of Catholics over centuries. A great fearsome Shepherd next appears to Hermas, expecting the 'living stones' which are the Church members to build up into a structure. This is not the gentle shepherd, full of loving concern and self-denial, which had been

mentioned by Jesus, but a powerful figure, who is going to be the Judge of human wrongdoing.

We see that love was there somewhere, in the heart and the life of Hermas, but he has begun to focus only on the plank of wood which must be present in the eyes of others. He is losing the full reality of forgiveness and salvation. A fierce, imagined Shepherd, who judges even people's thoughts, makes Hermas' usual daily freedoms of movement less spontaneous, less open to peace.

A second historical example of how the power of God's gifts becomes quite limited comes from a number of centuries later, in the eighth century, in a poem called *The Dream of the Rood*. 'Rood' is an Anglo-Saxon name for the Cross. It was written when pagan Viking invaders with their horned helmets and long ships, had been raiding Scotland and England. Some of them settled in the northern county of Yorkshire, but went on plundering, raping and attacking people. The poet wants to teach these warriors about Jesus Christ, but he has to use a language that will impress them: a language about power, not about widows and orphans, or meekness. We can even today travel to the village of Ruthwell in our English or Scots border regions, and see this Anglo-Saxon poem carved into the edges of a stone cross in the church there. This poet tells the tale of Christ on the Cross as a great hero, who is riding on the Cross, which is like a powerful horse, pawing the ground and snorting through its nostrils, eager to give the Roman soldiers a kick in revenge, but only if Christ gives the order to do that. However, it is told to hold back. A message about the great gift of restraining themselves is thus spoken to the Viking fighting men and seamen. Honour is the crucial factor here which prevents further violence. It is an unusual story, but a remarkable one.

A further development of this English viewpoint occurs two centuries later, when the Norsemen have mixed in and married with the local Anglo-Saxons, and sometimes their sons have begun to join the new local Benedictine monasteries. A monk called Anselm comes over

from Aosta in northern Italy to help them, and teaches theology to the warriors' sons. Anselm asks them the great question, "Why did God become Man?" He explains the meaning of this, not in terms of prophecies from the Bible, but with arguments about how human beings need salvation. With this style of theology, many Catholics realised that too many fellow English Christians had not realised that they need God to provide the full-scale reality of forgiveness and salvation. Other Europeans used this writing too.

Consequently, Anselm tackles the question one day when a young monk was running around the cloister and bumped into him. He is kind, but he points out that if he had bumped into the very strict prior, instead of him, he would really see how important forgiveness is. This could be a way of thinking about God. The size of the gift of forgiveness has to match up with the seriousness of the person being offended. If it is God who is being offended, then the gift of forgiveness will have to be cosmically huge. Since no human beings can provide this size of remedy for our faults, God's own Son had to be sent as the overwhelming remedy. This is a story about the gift of reconciliation between human beings and God, based on actual social mentalities, the well-known worries about authority. It is not based on how biblical prophecies point to Jesus but on the tensions between Catholic teaching about God's will and various actual experiences of Church failures. Mutual sympathy is formed between the higher and lower levels of a society through listening to God.

More Recent Quests for Creativity.

I would like to have included here something about the Zimbabwean novelist Charles Mungoshi (born in 1947), who went to All Saints Mission School and St. Augustine's, and later lectured at the universities of Zimbabwe, Durban and Florida. He grew up in Chivhu as an Anglican and published 18 books in all. He died in February this year. His collection of short stories, *Some Kinds of Wounds*, was banned by the British colonial regime for speaking out against oppression. I know only that two of the stories, *'The Mount of Moriah'*

and *'The Flood*,' clearly relate to passages from the Bible. He was a contemporary of two other African writers, Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiongo, whose novels I had to teach in the school in Malawi. Those are excellent story-tellers, but they were not attempting to write novels about Christianity, except indirectly. It would be valuable to bring in some theological insights from African writers.

Accordingly, there is Zimbabwe poetry from the 1970s in which contrasts between sincere and insincere Christianity are used to criticise both Zimbabwean clergy and the colonial clergy, both of whom failed to have enough courage to discover their lack of genuine faith. Both failed to challenge abuses of power. However, I can present here from one short poem by Charles Mungoshi, which has the title "*Prayer*":

"It would be very convenient now
to kneel down in the gritty sand
and beat my chest
and rend my garments
and cry out: 'Why me, O Lord?'
It would be an admirable thing to do
if it were not for the refrain
running beneath it all:
"Do you see me know Lord?
Are not I just wonderful?!"
Until, just like the worst
of all the best of us
I, too, am ambushed
before I have made
my last prayer." (2008).

His topic here seems to be that we can be ambushed into pride, making ourselves stand in place of God, just when we feel that we are being so very obviously humble. We fall into the trap of dishonesty. Yet we should not assume that every expression of confidence would be regarded as pride by Dr. Mungoshi, or therefore be condemned. He

must have had the genuine self-confidence of a Christian believer, in order to write critically against oppressive social situations.[2]

The same valuable point could also be made about the English Victorian poet Alfred Tennyson. He was a clear-minded critic of the military pride and destructive foolishness which had urged on British troops to fight on horseback against large guns in the south of Russia, in the Crimean war. "Cannon to the left of them, cannon to the right of them, volleyed and thundered. Someone has blundered," he wrote in his protest poem, *The Charge of the Light Brigade*. "Into the valley of death rode the six hundred." This is a Christian protest against militarism. Guns are the product of technology; technology has pushed people towards a murderous mentality. The poem was written at a time when many English citizens, in the new industrial era, found it difficult or impossible to see how Christian faith would challenge the structures, because of some unattractive and traditional patterns.

Yet this problem, of how we can regard faith as a gift attractive to outsiders, had already existed in Israel. The tale of Jonah is a short Jewish novel about this difficulty. It is a subversive piece of fiction, asking people in Israel to imagine a prophet who did not want to prophesy. A shocking thought! Jonah, we read, was sure that asking the pagans of Nineveh to put on sackcloth and ashes and seek forgiveness was a ridiculous idea. He ran away from God's call. Then when he was persuaded by God to go ahead with it, he also became angry and upset to watch so many non-Hebrews admitting that they were sinful. As modern Catholics, we can be similarly slow to believe that we should share our faith with all sorts of other members of society.

[2] More literary insights into how religious practice has been abused, or used to cover up oppression, can be found in K. Z. Muchemwa ed., *Zimbabwe Poetry in English: an anthology*, (Gwelo: Mambo Press, 1978) such as B. Zimunya's 'White Padre' and 'Black Padre' on pp. 81-83.

It is true, of course, that some aspects of our religion will alarm people, or cause despair. The Victorian literary writer, Sir Leslie Stephen was a clergyman who gave up believing because of the harsh doctrine of hell. He hated hearing it mentioned, and refused to let his two daughters learn about Christianity at all. So, one daughter, Virginia Woolf, grew up to become a great novelist - but with no sense that there is a God. Yet, like others after the First World War, she knew her society was a divided one, divided between those who had stayed at home during the war, and remained patriotic, and those who had fought and suffered in the trenches of the Somme, amongst the rotting bodies of their friends. Her great novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*, is about this divided society and the need for a new beginning. The central character, Clarissa Dalloway, is a woman who likes giving parties. She wants to bring all her friends together. Some think that she intends to show off, but that is not true. She is delighted to see her old friends arriving. But then one guest arrives, a doctor, with news of a death. Virginia Woolf did not trust doctors, so here character Clarissa wonders what to do next, since this is sure to ruin her party. Her party is an offering, like a bunch of flowers, but how can she include death in it? "I want to offer this, but oh, to whom?" she says.

The man who has died is Septimus, her friend, who had been in the War, and suffered seriously from shell-shock, and so badly that he committed suicide. Despite being kept ignorant of Christianity, Virginia Woolf's novels show how she took up Christian language from the people around her - language about suffering and offering, about communion and love. We rely on the tellers of stories to fill our thoughts with longings for forgiveness, mercy and wholeness. Even when death is overwhelming us, we need to hear accounts of the integrity of our Being, our possibility for recovering our true potential. Clarissa runs away from the bad news, but as she goes upstairs, she looks out of the window. Her eyes catch the eyes of someone in a neighbouring residence, a woman who is coming downstairs in the house opposite. She offers all she has to her. This is what story-telling does. Through it, we offer all we have to others.

In conclusion, our modern generation craves quick answers and tidy facts, to make them free from problems and difficulties right away. Television viewing sets up these mechanical expectations, but by doing so it stifles our willingness to tackle real questions or to share our faith deeply. Yet if we intend to create communities of worship, celebration and supportiveness for new inquirers (on a Journey of Faith course, for instance) who might join our church and the life of its members, we have to become people of discernment. We should be inviting people to share their individual stories, however unexpected and unfamiliar those will turn out to be. We cannot spot the point where a new direction of conversion is likely in somebody's life, if we always assume we already know the full picture of who that stranger or newcomer is. We have to welcome their stories and give thanks as we see their faith unfolding.