Storytelling Scotland

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In 2000, the millenium year, I was invited to give a series of talks on Scottish storytelling, past and present. It was an opportunity to review the rich diversity of ways in which Scots had represented themselves to themselves and to others, at a moment of significant change. In 2001 an expanded version of the lectures was published as *Storytelling Scotland: A Nation in Narrative*.[1]

Storytelling Scotland was not intended as a theological work but as a cultural study. It also has some political point since how can a society, community or nation make wise choices if it is ignorant of what has brought it to its present circumstances? Democracy without education is a consumerist sham. Yet *Storytelling Scotland* has come to have an increasing theological significance in my own thinking.

It reminded me first of all that, at many points in its history, the Church has tried to give an account, not just of its own origins and purpose but of Scotland and to place the life of all of Scotland's people within a narrative that is both Christian and Scottish. Sometimes the Church has been the main or even sole provider of such narratives contextualising our country's faults and hopes within a wider spiritual imperative. At times, too, as during the Covenanting Wars or the Jacobite Risings, religion has offered competing versions of Christian narrative to validate competing factions.

The role of the Church was to preach a truth alive in real places for real people – Scottish places and Scottish people – rather than an abstract universal system. So where is our Christian account, or accounts, of Scotland's meaning and purpose now? Are we engaged in telling that story at this moment of historic change? Are we interpreters of what is happening before our eyes, or have we been diverted into considering the purpose and future of the Church as the primary question?

Secondly, exploring the storytellers of Scotland, I became strongly aware that the land, sea and skies of Scotland are as much players in

our destiny as human history. There can be no future without a fruitful balance and interchange between the human and the natural. Perhaps such a balance can only be underpinned by some form of religious account that transcends the subjectively human to combine fact and value, science and emotion, spiritual discipline and sensory pleasure.

Thirdly, reviewing the ways that Scotland's story has been told over the centuries, I was forcibly struck by how often ordinary people have turned towards a theology of suffering to lend dignity and meaning to their lives.

In traditional societies the heroic sacrifice of leaders could transform oppression and even death into a validation of the community's life and well-being. Hence the vital importance of the chief in life and death. This perspective was given specifically Christian and national grounding in the tragic story of William Wallace, Guardian and Liberator. Blind Harry's *Wallace*, a later summation of popular traditions and tales, depicts Wallace as a Christ figure, dying on behalf of the people, yet through death and dismemberment sowing the seeds of the nation's resurrection. The foundations of this narrative had already been laid by Walter Bower, Abbot of Inchcolm, in his massive *Scotichronicon*. 'Christ', writes Bower, intending no blasphemy at the end of his monumental task, 'he is no Scot who is not pleased with this book.'[2]

Of course, there are dangers in any such comparisons if they are not made against the full stature of Christ. But there is greater danger in not earthing the Christian story and in missing the presence of God, the Christ experience, in the process of history. During the struggle for Scottish independence the Scottish Church connected the experience of ordinary Scots and the Christian story through a theology of sacrifice and suffering. No doubt jingoism also played a part but, in retrospect, the Church took a risk that was necessary at a moment of crisis.

Later, historical experiences proved even more troubling for Scottish Christianity. How, even now, can we account in Christian terms for the suffering involved in the industrialisation and urbanisation of

Scotland, not least the accompanying migration, emigration and forced clearance? The rapidity and extent of these changes within a few generations had effects on Scotland's people that are still with us: depopulation in some areas and overpopulation in others, a Scots diaspora across the globe, severe environmental degradation and the impairment of psychological and social health. Such changes were through time successfully negotiated by a growing middle class minority but for many there was a loss of social and personal self esteem, and of physical wellbeing, that may still underlie many contemporary problems in Scottish society.

One of the less noticed or discussed consequences of these traumas, not least the clearances, was disruption of the normal cultural processes through which people interpreted and assimilated their experiences. These included above all the practice of religion and the traditional arts of song and story. Only gradually did those at the rough end of change begin to try to make sense of it, and by then their lives were irrevocably changed.

In his comprehensive study *Passive Obedience and Prophetic Protest* the Canadian Professor Donald C. Smith demonstrates that, by and large, the Scottish Church flunked the challenge of social change and suffering on this scale.[3] In both rural and urban areas where the Church was not still actively promoting the secular and economic powers of the day, it turned to a detached gospel of spiritual salvation that was designed to compensate for people's sufferings rather than transform them. In due course many city dwellers turned to organised religion seeking a new kind of coherence or refuge within the wasteland. The institutional church grew exponentially in terms of the range and abundance of its activities and, to this day, Church membership can be perceived as an alternative to normal, social and cultural life rather than its inspiration and complement. Critically, political narratives of secular salvation became the bearers of a 'this wordly' hope for change – the earthly paradise of socialism rather than the heavenly Zion hereafter.

In the nineteenth century a wide range of storymakers arose to offer frameworks for understanding the processes of historical change. This

was the period when Scotland gave birth to the historical novel in the shape of Sir Walter Scott, John Galt and James Hogg. Each sought in their own ways to 'narrative the nation' at a period of crisis, and Scott's storytelling in particular was to have a huge popular impact. Other more radical voices were also heard. The Lowland weaver poets took their cue from Tom Paine and Burns while, as the century progressed, Highland storytellers and song makers turned to their own deep rooted theological traditions to affirm that the earth is the Lord's and not the landlords'. Surveying the huge upsurge of popular Scottish storytelling in this century you can only conclude that, for the majority of Scots, storytelling was the normal way of trying to 'make sense of things' or in religious parlance, 'doing theology'.

In this regard it is notable that twentieth century Scottish writers, poets and storytellers continued to exhibit strong moral and spiritual concerns, and to probe 'the condition of Scotland' in terms that theologians could easily recognise. This is obviously true of a George Mackay Brown, or Edwin Muir, with their explicit use of Christian symbolism but it is also true of Lewis Grassic Gibbon, Alasdair Gray, Ian Crichton Smith and Robin Jenkins.[4] But the official Christian interpreters – ministers and theologians – largely ignored the dynamics of Scottish experience in favour of international academic theologies. Though such theologies had their own specific contexts – Barth's reaction against 'German' Christianity for example – little attempt was made to draw Scottish parallels.

This unhealthy distance between experience and reflection may have contributed to the crisis of confidence in ordained ministry that is now ravaging the traditional structures of the Church of Scotland. Catholic priests suffered a not dissimilar loss of status and respect.

People had come to confuse priestliness and holiness so, as the priesthood declined, so did the Church. In the words of the historian Rosalind Mitchison

> 'The Church had by 1550 ceased to be an institution effectively presenting the image of a spiritual life to the mass of the laity, or receiving participation and loyalty from laymen.'[5]

If our challenge is to embody ministry in forms that are recognisable and speak to the Scottish community of Christian vocation and service, then it is troubling to record that for reasons often outwith its control or influence, the capital 'M' Ministry has lost the confidence of Scottish society as either authoritative interpreters or as models of religious life.

The Scottish churches have not lacked attempts at 'reform from within' in recent times. Successive initiatives in church renewal, church growth, community ministry and ecumenical partnership have, however, made little impact on the overall position of Christianity in Scottish society. Perhaps such movements place too much faith in their own versions of 'the Gospel' and too much focus on the Church rather than society as a whole. The churches have demonstrated a tenacious institutional capacity to absorb and disempower reformers, prophets, missionaries and poets, so there is practical logic as well as Christian principle in beginning outwith the Church and allowing that encounter to shape the community of faith.

Clearly the resources of scripture and of Christian experience in Scotland and beyond are there in ample abundance to assist us. Christianity is designed to help make sense of who we have been, are, and of where we are going. Perhaps only Christianity can do this for us, though not if we are to do this for us, though not if we are to be partisan or exclusive. The Christianity we need now in Scotland is in the words of the modern Russian Orthodox martyr, Alexander Men, 'open to people, to their problems, their longings, open to the world'. It is our vocation to be ministers, Christian servants and interpreters, for our people in this time and place. We must be fully but not exclusively Scottish Christians.

We begin, first of all, by sharing the reality and depth of suffering around us. The story of God's people as reflected in the Bible, the vocation of Christ, the life of faith in Scotland and the world church, have all taught us the fractured depths into which humanity can fall – the brokenness and weakness, the poverty, the loveless degradation. Yet we live in a society that does not want to acknowledge suffering – sensation yes, suffering no. A conspiracy of non-recognition is wrapped around the reality of so many lives in Scotland today. The Church can

and should be their storyelling resource, giving voice to the mentally ill, the imprisoned, the vulnerable, and the excluded. To allow everyone in society to speak, and be heard, is to allow Christ.

This mission or Christian vocation includes the natural world as well as human life. The suffering, dying and rising Christ is part of the being of the cosmic creator spirit. The Body of Christ incorporates our suffering humanity and our despoliated planet. We cannot separate the two any more than we can divide God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Not if creation too is groaning, as Paul has it, in the pains of childbirth. Clearly we cannot love the environment. We have not seen it. We ignore or maltreat that which surrounds us.

Yet Christians do not revel in pain and suffering. In recognising brokenness, sin and oppression Christians are suffering to wholeness, healing and salvation – for the cosmos, the nation, the community, the family and the self – by creating relationships of mutual support and enrichment. The vision of a redeemed nation, at peace with itself and others, glows through the prophetic poetry of the Old Testament to break into the daylight of the kingdom of God as preached and embodied by Jesus. This kingdom is heavenly and earthly without disjunction – even in the midst of death we experience the life eternal.

There is realism and aspiration here for the community of Scotland as we struggle to become a just society that plays its full part in the community of nations, and not a helpless plaything of economic globalisation ruthlessly advanced at the expense of human welfare. What other purpose can our democracy and Parliament serve if it is not the community health, justice, moral wellbeing and environmental integrity demonstrated in the teaching and example of Jesus? The opportunity for the Scottish Christians to affirm these values in alliance with all who share them, while acknowledging their spiritual source, has no previous parallel in Scotland's history.

In indicating the importance of democratic renewal in Scotland I am not prioritising a 'social' Gospel over a 'spiritual' one. Throughout the nineteen-nineties the evidence of explicit spiritual search across Scottish society increased incrementally. Every High Street bears

witness to the 'Celtic Buddha' phenomenon. Christianity offers this quest holistic models that unite spirituality with the personal, the social and the cosmic. These are not abstract connections but vital to understanding how things actually work in society. Drug-taking, for example, is a product of powerful socio-economic factors with a desire for inner experiences that transcend social constraints. The battle lines of social mission versus spiritual salvation, liberal versus evangelical, or even Protestant versus Catholic, are primarily ecclesiastical and increasingly irrelevant. Christianity needs to draw on all its Scottish resources in the new cultural situation.

Only a wide ranging body of small 'm' ministers can embody the Christian vision with integrity and reintroduce Christian vocation in ways appropriate to twenty-first century conditions. Many of them are already active, building new kinds of connection and community. Some have links with the churches but few are restricted to church structures. Their stories have the power to sow the seeds of a new Church even if the old institutions continue to cling stubbornly to their death wish. I do not believe that I am writing a theological postscript because, as Scotland moves in new directions so will Scottish Christianity. We have talked too much about the Church and too little about God and the world in which we live, but new narratives are being formed in the crucible of change. Perhaps the new theologians will be more like storytellers and less like academic specialists.

1 Smith, Donald *Storytelling Scotland: A Nation in Narrative* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2002)

2 Bower, Walter *A History Book for Scots: selections from the Scotichronicon I* (ed) D.E.R. Watt (Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 1998) p 290

3 See Smith, Donald C. *Passive Obedience and Prophetic Protest: Social Criticism in the Scottish Church 1830–1945* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987)

4 See Smith, Donald 'Culture and Religion' in Scott, Paul H. (ed.) *A Concise Cultural History of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1992)

5 Mitchison, Rosalind, *Life in Scotland* (London: B.J. Batsford, 1978)