

NOT Black Riding Hood: *Lectio divina* and Biblical Discourse



Imagine yourself telling a fairy story to a child or group of children! Try changing any of the details of the story and you will discover something significant about audiences and expectation: there is no way a five year old will permit 'Little Red Riding Hood' become Little *Black* Riding Hood! Hansel and Gretel will not become *George* and Gretel! Goldilocks will not countenance a fourth bear, and even in non-porridge-eating-households, muesli or flakes will not find their way into those bears' bowls!

Changing Unchanging Stories

The faithfulness of children to the stories they love provides an interesting insight into a key difficulty that people have with the Bible. Many people, including people of deep and genuine faith, buy into ONE story and nothing changes that story.¹ When we begin to sense the differences between what we expect a text to say, and what it actually says, we gloss over what is on the page and substitute the story we know. For example, when there is tension between God and Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels, refuge is taken by referring to Jesus in John where he says, 'The Father and I are one.' (10:30) Or in Matthew's parable of the Treasure in the Field (13:44), little attention is paid to the detail that the man *hides* the treasure he has found or to the *joy* he experiences in the finding and in the knowledge of where the treasure is. And yet, these apparently insignificant details are essential for Matthew and the good news he has to share. For Matthew, the person of faith is the person who has not

only found the treasure, but who is able to act even though the treasure remains hidden, and is not (yet) possessed. Consider the shift of energy that would occur were those of us who are in leadership in parishes, communities and various institutions to act more deeply out of the radical vision of the treasure(s) hidden within our parishes and our communities, within our schools and colleges, within our hospitals and care institutions. To miss the detail is to miss the freshness and power of God's living word.

The evangelists and all the biblical authors rework the one great biblical story so that, as Luke puts it, we 'may know the truth of the things of which we have been instructed.' (1:4)² Let us look at why stories can be reworked and re-read. This will hopefully permit us to appreciate how narratives function and how better to read and pray them.

Story and Discourse: The What and the How of Biblical Narratives

All narratives have two dimensions: the story itself and *how* the story is told.³ The story is *what* happens and *why* it happens [a person did X, then Y happened, and this resulted in Z]. *How* the story is told we term discourse. To cut to the chase, in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, there is only ONE story: Jesus always goes to Calvary, Jesus always has a Last Supper, Jesus is always raised, he never becomes friendly with Pilate, and the Pharisees never realise that Jesus' approach to the Law has a lot going for it. The list could go on. In sum, there is one story. The difference between Matthew, Mark, Luke and John lies in HOW that story is told. The difference is in the discourse.

In the four New Testament Gospels, we have four different 'tellings' of the story of Jesus. In the four Gospels, we have one story and four discourses. Christians have always defended this diversity and the richness that comes in its wake. We have not always understood why we have done this, and our practice – e.g., in giving John a status higher than the other three Gospels – has frequently been at odds with it. That said, any large-scale attempt to smooth out differences in the four Gospels has been strongly resisted. For example, in the late second century, Tatian (c. 120–180 AD) sought to replace the four Gospels with a single harmonised narrative of Jesus called the *Diatessaron*. While this gospel harmony gained a significant foothold among some Eastern Christians, it was in the end firmly removed from Church use – a visceral affirmation of biblical discourse and its essential diversity.

Discourse, because it lies at the heart of narrative (and of poetry), lies at the heart of the Bible. Biblical discourse is the foundation of *lectio divina*. While *lectio divina* attends to the biblical story, it attends even more deeply to biblical discourse. *Lectio divina* is built upon attention to the words of the biblical text. In *lectio* (reading), the first movement of *lectio divina*, one attends to the text. At the beginning it can be a dull undertaking; it is work! It demands focus, freshness, openness, memory ... and thought!⁴ As Michael Casey, with his characteristic insight, puts it, 'one of the strongest deterrents to longterm fidelity to *lectio divina* is a sort of pious laziness that does not permit the mind to become actively engaged.'⁵ *Lectio* (reading) is not only an engagement of

the mind, but it is not mindless; it does need the mind.

The Power of The Word

Lectio divina serves our receiving of the healing, life-giving and saving word of God. It does so by the way we welcome the words of Sacred Scripture. *Lectio divina* creates the space where the Holy Spirit can empower us to hear the word of God anew (see Luke 24:32). This cannot happen unless we give time to the words. To cite Casey again, ‘we read texts, they saunter nonchalantly across the surface of our minds and fall off the edge never to be heard again. Unless we stop them and engage in dialogue with them, even the holiest passages of Scripture will leave us unmoved and unchanged.’⁶ We are moved by the actual words. These words make a home in us (see Col 3:16): words like, ‘Has no one condemned you? ... Neither do I condemn you...’ (John 8:11). Even small words like, ‘and they ALL ate and were satisfied’ (Mark 8:42) touch us. We all have words like this. We carry them around with us – for years. They move us. They heal us. They make us new. Attending to the text, reading well showers them upon us day after day.

The first step in *lectio divina* is *lectio*, reading the words: not just mouthing them, but attending to them, seeing what words are there, noting what’s said, realising what’s not said. It means attending to the detail; it requires taking the discourse seriously. It takes time and effort; it requires alertness and openness, humility and the willingness to be surprised. It is work. It is the work of God. It is the opening of the mind and heart to One who can save. This is the solid foundation. All else is biblical sand (see Matt 7:24–7, esp. 7:24).

NOTES

¹ Of course, children sometimes do change well-known biblical stories – with hilarious results, as captured by Sarah Winman in her *When God was a Rabbit* (London: Headline Review, 2011) when the heroine remembers the moment she ‘modified’ the script of her school nativity play: ‘You need a room?’ I said, suddenly veering away from the script.

I saw Mary and Joseph look at each other ... ‘Let me think,’ I said. The silence in the theatre was thick, clawing with anticipation. ...

‘Yes,’ I said, ‘I have a room, with a lovely view at an excellent rate. Come this way, please,’ and ... two thousand years of Christianity was instantly challenged as I led Mary (now crying) and Joseph towards a double en-suite with TV and mini bar. [Extract: p. 47]

² ‘The Bible is a repository of many ways of interpreting the same events and reflecting upon the problems. It itself urges us to avoid excessive

simplification and narrowness of spirit.’ The Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), 90. [= III.A.2]

³ The distinction was most famously and influentially formulated by the American literary critic, Seymour Chatman in his *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978). For more accessible initial approaches, see Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 83–94 or H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 12–17.

⁴ In *lectio divina* then, one is not seeking the ‘message’ of the text which is then applied; rather, one pays attention to the words, in order to hear THE word. The words of the text are the sacrament of the Word of God, just as the Eucharistic bread is the sacrament of the Risen Lord. As one cannot receive the Eucharist without receiving the bread, so one cannot receive the Word, without receiving the words. It took the Latin Church centuries to recover the importance, vitality, and power of receiving the Eucharistic bread; it may take us decades, if not centuries, to recover the importance, power and vitality of attending to the biblical word.

⁵ Michael Casey, *Sacred Reading: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina* (Ligouri, MS: Triumph Books, 1996), 63. Casey’s is possibly the finest contemporary exploration of *lectio divina* available in English.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 73.

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