Society of Ordained Scientists Annual Gathering, 2019
"Science, Faith, and Narrative"
Rev'd. Dr. Sharon Jones, Chaplain, University of Birmingham

Session 1: "Beginnings"

> "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people." (John 1:1-4)

The church is still but for the flickering candlelight, the muffled shuffle of service booklets, and the sway of the drunken revellers who have somehow found themselves in church for the first time in years. Why they're here – well, not even they could explain themselves. Perhaps it's the lure of the candlelight and familiar carols that raise the ghosts of Christmas past. Perhaps it's because of a deep-seated need to be with others – the draw of community no matter how transient. Perhaps church was the last place serving. Or perhaps it's something else… something wilder, more mysterious… they're drawn to something - something of which they are a part even if they're not fully conscious of it.

As the clock ticks on toward midnight – that strange liminal time, on the cusp of a new day – you read those familiar words: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Perhaps it's the twinkle of fairy lights or the pre-service mulled wine that was thrust into your hand by your caring but over-enthusiastic church warden, but something has changed. It is as if the very utterance of the Word has set a storm brewing. The air is charged; expectant. Is this the moment - the moment of creation that echoes down to us in waves, light years past yet always present? The divine Word speaking to us across time and space. Calling to us with the hopeful expectation of a response?

Rowan Williams once noted:

> "It's curious how religious traditions of both East and West seem to regard that as a central and foundational metaphor – the sacred syllable which, in Indian religious tradition, echoes from the beginning in the cave of being is not light years removed from the Word at the beginning of John's Gospel, the sense that there is that to which all language is a reply or an echo."

And how do we respond to this divine syllable? This divine excess that rings out - in and through creation? This syllable that is itself the act and the actor? Perhaps our response is written into the very code of our being… an impulse so strong that none

of us, from the toddler at the knee to the technician working on the Large Hadron Collider… we tell stories – to ourselves and to others.

For we humans are narrative animals: 'Homo Fabulans – the tellers and interpreters of narrative.' You only have to look at our consumption of stories to know that our hunger for stories is unquenchable. Whether in the form of television, film, books, theatre, political campaigns… we never seem to tire of being told a tale. And we can't seem to help telling tales either… stories of our daily lives, convenient fictions that allow us to live with uncomfortable truths… we can't seem to avoid turning life into a story with a plot, with protagonists and antagonists… everything from the stories of our origins to how we heroically negotiated planes, trains and automobiles to make it here today. Philosophers have argued that it is the very skills involved in storytelling, our imaginations and schematising capacities, that allow us to experience time and life itself. Paul Ricoeur said:

> "[T]ime becomes human to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience.[1]"

> "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14)

Jesus was a skilled storyteller. He speaks in stories. Teaches in stories, and lived perhaps the greatest story ever told. The parables he told weren't funny little stories just meant to entertain. And they're not merely meant to teach us some point of morality, like Aesop's Fables and countless folk and fairy tales. Parables do the whole work of theology. In the sense that they engage our minds, because they're far from straightforward. They engage our hearts because the stories that Jesus tells are so familiar to us even two thousand years on. And they engage our imagination by literally inviting us to step into the situation.

John Henry Newman was not the first to make the point that faith itself takes a leap of imagination.[2] In order to believe that a spiritual reality exists beyond the world of the senses, we must risk believing in what we cannot see, taste, touch or hear. In order to believe in God, and in order to see the working out of the divine in our world, we must imagine things other than how Enlightenment philosophy, and Richard Dawkins, would have us believe them to be. Without our imaginative assent, religion remains a set of doctrines and rituals – beautiful though they may be. Without our imaginative assent we are unable to envisage the bigger picture, the divine story into which our lives fit.

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[1] Ricoeur, Paul. 1985. *Time and Narrative*, trans. K. Blamey and D. Pellauer, vol. 3, p. 192. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985.

[2] See Newman, John Henry. 1985. *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Those who participate in the Ignatian Exercises learn the value of the imagination in understanding our place in God's continuing story. Saint Ignatius invited retreatants to enter into biblical scenes, to experience them with all of their senses, to feel the dry heat against their skin, the noise of an expectant crowd, an uncomfortable thirst and the sight of a man of Galilee whom they say, is the Son of God. By doing this, we are encouraged to leave behind our critical faculties, and instead to inhabit the story, to enter into it completely. The imagination allows us to inhabit worlds that are not our own, to in some ways experience what it would be like 'if'. As Paul Avis said, 'if it lives in the imagination, the battle for belief is more than half over.'[3]

I think most of us would be comfortable with thinking of faith as involving a leap of imagination – an entering into the world of the ongoing story of God. But what about science? Does science ever deviate from careful observation and consideration of substantiated fact into the world of imagination? I think it quite clearly does. And yet it is not so long ago that the idea that science involved imagination was pooh-poohed. And even now, some feel more comfortable speaking of the scientific imagination in terms of image-based metaphor alone, as if entering into a more narrative form of imagination would sully the science. But Keats said that imagination foreshadowed reality, and I have a sneaking suspicion that this is as true for the scientist as it is for the poet.

I would argue that scientists have been some of the greatest storytellers of our time – driven to tell the story of how the world works. When we look up into the majesty of the heavens and contemplate how all this began, it's not surprising that we feel the need to somehow humanise the grandeur by telling stories. When we notice seemingly random patterns in the fluctuating population of certain species, we ask why and then we begin telling ourselves the stories of why that might be. I don't think we can help it. Nicholas Lash said '… the formal systems we construct, whether in philosophy or science, are coloured, shaped, determined by the storytelling soul from which they sprang.'

I like that idea that we are storytelling souls. As the Cuban-born Italian writer, Italo Calvino, famously wrote, 'It is not the voice that commands the story: it is the ear.'[4] Stories are demanded of scientists just as they were demanded of the bards of old, just as they are demanded of people of faith. For a time there was no great distinction between the two. Theology and science were two different approaches to the search for truth. Science read the book of nature while theology began with the 'good book'. Theology concerned itself with the "why's" and science the "how's".

Those who entered the storytelling realm through the book of nature began telling stories based on their observations of the world. Some were histories of interpretation or biographies of things… other stories were more speculative, incredible acts of imagination that begin in the language of mathematics but were

[3] Avis, Paul. 1999. *God and the Creative Imagination*, p. 82. London: Routledge.
[4] Calvino, Italo. 2010. *Invisible Cities*, "Marco Polo to Kublai Khan." London: Vintage.

inevitable pulled into a language that can be shared with those not fluent in augmented matrices and slack variables. 'Language evolved to help people get around on earth not down inside atoms,' George Johnson reminds us. But inevitably, even Nobel prize winners are obliged to tell a story because numbers don't change minds and hearts – stories do. And whether scientists are bidding for grants, justifying the need for animal experimentation, or just filling in the 'impact' section of the Research Excellent Framework entry, scientists are obliged to tell a story.

Philosopher and cognitive scientist Daniel Dennett said: "I have to tell you a story. You don't want to be swayed by a story? Well I know you won't be swayed by formal argument; you won't even listen to a formal argument for my conclusion, so I start where I have to start."

Perhaps it is not so surprising that we are creatures of story. We are, after all, the unruly children of a Creator God; artist par excellence, weaver of stories and meaning who began as the Word – the word that expanded out and set planets and stars spinning, creating time and space as well as beings that could reflect on that creation. And in the Bible, we have an amazing array of stories and verse that chronicle God's relationship with his people, from the garden of Eden to the garden of Gethsemane. Our God does not direct temporality from the side-lines of eternity, a distant voice that calls out of the heavens. This notion is well and truly interrupted by the presence of Christ in the Christian story. Love pitches its tent amongst us. God himself enters the story realm already framed by the Old Testament, requiring that we read the stories of the Old Testament with new incarnational eyes.

John 1:9: "The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world." Our story didn't end with that final warning at the end of Revelation. We kept on telling stories. Some explained why we made choices, rightly or wrongly. Some stories explained the kindness of strangers and the comparative cruelty of those whom we love. Some stories were told to amuse when the world seemed inhospitable and cold and some stories helped us grieve or love or wait. Some stories tried to express the inexpressible…and the seemingly intolerable barriers of language were broken down by the bards and poets who presented us with wordy pictures that expressed through images the things we found impossible to speak of in prose.

But as we have found out to our cost, stories don't even have to have the ring of truth about them to be convincing. And even the stories told by scientists have to prove their worth in the modern marketplace of narratives. Stories can be damaging and divisive as well as healing and unifying. We have seen too many narratives wrack our world to be unaware of the damage a good story can do to our vision of the world and each other. And so the stories we tell, the stories we inhabit deserve our attention. Particularly the intertwined narratives of faith and science, so often pitted against each other and yet here I stand in a room full of ordained scientists.

> "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into

> being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people." (John 1:1-4)

This week I hope we can engage our story-telling souls and spend some time thinking about how the stories of our faith have been influenced by the stories told by science, and how the stories of our faith have helped shape the scientific imagination. How do the stories we tell honour the Word made flesh?

Session 2: "Rising Tension"

> "[T]ime becomes human to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience." *-Paul Ricouer*[5]

Paul Ricouer suggests that we need a narrative to live by. Without stories our lives become unimaginable. Without the narratives that bind our lives together our individual lives would seem to us to be series of unrelated instances. Stories allow us to weave together the most indiscriminate bizarre realities into coherent narrative which make sense. How else could we understand how suffering could be turned into a positive experience, or how a seemingly positive event could bring individual suffering? But more than this, Ricoeur argues that personal is best envisaged as the result of the stories we tell about ourselves and the stories told by others. So, time is humanised through the narrative we tell about it and narrative becomes meaningful to the extent that it explains a temporal experience.

In *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur explores the relationship between history and fiction. It is, of course, common to see the two as separate and having little in common: after all, is it not the case that history is the story told about something that actually happened, whilst fiction is the product of an imaginary? The characters that are recounted in history had actual temporal existence, while the characters of fiction exist only in the mind of the author and the reader.[6] Ricoeur, however, disputes that a dichotomous relationship exists between history and fiction, as both of them are in some way related to reality, to social existence. He points to the fact that both history and fiction share a common narrative structure. The task of a historian is to make meaningful events of human history. This involves plotting out events in such a way that we understand how and why one event led to another. The art of a good writer could be said to involve similar practices. It is a common trope of literary works to spin the reader a tale which involves seemingly unrelated events and characters, only to tie them together at the conclusion of the tale. What both history and fiction does

[5] Ricoeur, 1985.
[6] Ibid., pp. 127-41.

is to offer to us one interpretation of what could be said about a series of contingent events.

Ricoeur tells us it is only through emplotment that the diverse elements are drawn into an illusion of unity. Without a narrative to bring together the contingent elements of the story, each of those events and all of the characters could have been different or even non-existent. And yet the narrative makes it appear as if each of those elements and characters were supposed to be there. In this way plot actually lends itself to temporal reality.[7] And like all good fiction, in reality, identity is opened up for constant revision until the revelation. The characters that we envisage to be the 'goodies' of the peace quite often turn out to be the murderer, and so it is with our own lives.[8] Although some aspects of foreign identity are contingent upon things like the situation we find ourselves in, or as Heidegger would put it are 'thrown,' there are still multiple stories that we can tell about these aspects of ourselves that seemed quite fixed.[9]

Ricoeur then lays down a gauntlet to theology by demonstrating the inescapability of narrative to accounts of identity. Narrative has been taken up by a number of theological positions in the late twentieth century. However, the one currently most in vogue is that associated with George Lindbeck and the Yale School: Postliberal theology. I provide here an overview of this movement, in order to pick out areas of both its strengths and its weaknesses. This then assists me in formulating my own agenda for developing a feminist theology of story.

Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones have pointed out that the recovery of narrative within the discipline of theology began before anyone could imagine a Postliberal world.[10] In the 1970's, religious studies departments across the United States, in their teaching about the nature of religious experience began to utilise the notion of story, specifically autobiography, in order to compare and contrast the religious narratives of people from different traditions and different cultural environments (whether across space or time). The 1970's also saw the rise in New Religious Movements, such as the Human Potential Movement, which spurred interest in 'spiritual growth' across the Western world. As people turned to the more esoteric side of life, they became interested in experience and in seeking out their 'true selves' by relating to various forms of therapeutic and spiritual disciplines and practices.

The rise in the importance of various types of psychotherapy during this period must be considered in relation to the recovery of narrative. Nearly all 'brands' of

[7] Ibid., p.152.

[8] Ricoeur argues that characters only rise to the status of persons when they re-evaluate their actions and their sufferings. The characters of which he speaks can be fictional or real and Ricoeur does not deny that these characters both act and are acted upon. In fact, the interaction of characters creates secondary narratives which are the stories of families, communities, and nations.

[9] Macquarrie, John. 1972. *Existentialism*, p.191. London: Hutchinson and Co.

[10] Hauerwas, Stanley and Gregory Jones. 1997. *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology.* Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock.

psychotherapy use the telling and retelling of personal narratives in order to rewrite the stories of individuals' experiences. In this way the therapist guides the client to a different, not necessarily more truthful understanding of their past experiences and future horizons. This rewriting of people's autobiographical narratives allows them to revision themselves and their relationship to the past, present and future. The growth in the popularity of these wholly narrative 'talking' therapies, must have had an effect on the expectations that individuals hold in regards to spirituality, and as an extension, theological discourse. It was little wonder that those studying and teaching in religious studies and theology departments were calling for a more narrative approach to understanding religious experience. This, in itself, tells us that it may be possible – or even necessary – to conceive of the 'turn to narrative' in theology in a way which does not privilege the intratextuality of Christian faith (as with postliberalism), but may be understood in a broader perspective. As we construct and reconstruct our spiritual identities, we do so from within spiritual and cultural frameworks which are polysemic and multi-textual: and at the heart of it all rests the autobiography of the self. I offer extended reflection on the importance of autobiography to narrative theology at a subsequent point.

A further point arises here, as we consider how individuals and communities actually appropriate the 'narratives by which they live', or by which they 'remythologize' their own selves. Namely, we can, in fact, draw a distinction between what is narrative and what is story, although both terms tend to be used inter-changeably in the English-speaking world – and, indeed, following common practice and the usage of my sources I have done so to date in this thesis. However, it may assist us to distinguish the two conceptually. On this analysis, narrative is a means of representing a story, whether the story is true or fictional. Narrative, then, is the 'text'; it is the particular and specific way in which a given 'story' is told.

In this way, it would be possible to conceive of telling the same story in innumerable different ways, and for it still be the same story. "I went to the shop this morning" is a shorter version of "I went out at nine thirty this morning in order to do a little shopping." The narrative (the re-presentation) has changed, but the story has remained the same. The same story can also be told from different points of view: "Ms Granger went out to do an early shop" or "My sister went out shopping this morning." The point of view from which the story is told will determine the narrative to certain extent.

H. Porter Abbott argues that narrative therefore consists of two different elements; narrative discourse and story. The story refers to the series of events being represented, and narrative discourse refers to the vehicle by which the story is represented. Some narrative scholars find that these terms are too easily misunderstood by English speakers and prefer to use the more technical term *fabula* to mean story and *sjuzet* to refer to narrative discourse: in other words, the difference

between the raw materials of the story and the way in which they are organised.[11] The ways in which stories are told, regardless of whether they refer to an 'historical' or fictional series of events, suggest that they are indeed re-presentations; that the story (or sequence of events) existed before the narrative retelling of the tale. As Jurij Lotman has noted, narratives are made up of discrete units of meaning (words and phrases) that can be reshuffled to differing effects, whereas, a piece of visual pictorial art, such as a painting or a sculpture, is perceived as an 'isolated whole'.[12] A particular story may therefore be told by any number of narrators, and the narrative discourse would be specific to different narrators as they would inevitably select different material and emphasise the parts of the story that were most significant for them. So for literary theorists, like Peter Brooks, the concept of the *fabula* is useful, because it helps us to understand that the events being narrated are always past; and *sjuzet* a helpful conceptual tool because it reminds us that the story told may give the appearance of being one and the same thing as the *fabula*, but it is not.

Clearly, there is always some form of movement in a narrative, by which the reader is taken from one point to another. Narrative is "chron-logical", as Seymore Chatman puts it, in that narrative conveys the passage of time in two ways.[13] Firstly, narrative creates its own sense of time in the amount of time it takes to read, hear, tell, or write it, but unlike other forms of text, it also creates the sense of the passage of time by means of the story. For example, one might read a short story that takes an hour to read, but the narrative tells a story that covers the passing of five years which is conveyed throughout the movement of the plot. The space that is created by this movement is sometimes represented quite literally, as it is in travel writing, whilst in other narratives, the passing of time creates the impression of space.[14] Within academic discourse, it is often said that an argument or field of study is being 'opened out' within a particular narrative. In relation to fiction, critics often use the words 'as the narrative unfurls', again emphasising the feeling of space being created by a particular work. The French cultural theorist, Roland Barthes, in trying to elucidate this process talks about five codes, through which, he asserts, a narrative passes.[15]

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[11] Abbott, H. Porter. 2002. *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p.16. Abbott points out that the term *sjuzet* actually refers to the ordering of the events, most commonly known to most as the plot, so it is a narrower term than narrative discourse that refers not only to plotting, but also style and mood etc.

[12] Lotman, J.M. 1977. The Structure of the Narrative Text. In *Soviet Semiotics: An Anthology*, edited by D.P. Lucid. London: Johns Hopkins University Press.

[13] Chatman, Seymore. 1990. *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press. p.9.

[14] It is interesting to note that travel writing, along with the academic study of anthropology became popular genres of writing for women in the nineteenth century. One could surmise that in an era when women were fighting for space, both personal and political, that the overt creation of space within the narrative form would be appealing.

[15] Barthes, Roland. 1974. *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller. London: Blackwell. Barthes posits a hermeneutic code, a cultural code, a symbolic code, a semic code and an actional code. All of them but the cultural code (which is effectively an epistemological category) depend on the momentum of the narrative for their expression.

Unlike some other theorists who believe that a narrative can be formed by a single event, Barthes talks about the 'code of action', which is, most simply put, one action followed by at least one other, but more usually more.[16] The 'proairetic' code describes the linear nature of these narrative events, and is concerned with the reader's expectations and actual narrated actions. Then there is the 'semic' code of character traits, as even if the narrative concerns an inanimate object, or a particular landscape, they will be drawn as characters and read as characters.[17] Barthes also argues that a text will necessarily draw on the code of binary oppositions in the symbolic creation of meaning. However, the last code, the 'hermeneutic' is perhaps the most interesting of Barthes' codes. He sees the hermeneutic as both propelling the narrative forward, towards the final disclosure, the point of revealing, but also as retarding the advancement of the narrative by way of 'equivocation', 'snares' and 'false replies'.[18] In parallel form, then, just as the proairetic code is concerned with the expectations of the reader and the actions actually narrated, the hermeneutic code is concerned with the questions that the reader may have and the way in which the narrative answers them.

Barthes suggests that narratives are therefore concerned with questions and answers as well as expectations and actions and it is certainly true that if a narrative evokes certain important questions within the mind of the reader, a resolution is normally expected. But readers also, as Peter Brooks has noted, expect to be surprised and often feel cheated if they are not. The detective novel is probably the genre of writing in which this dynamic is most clearly observed. If we consider an Agatha Christie novel in which there is a murder, we expect to find out, at the resolution of the story, who the murderer was as well as how the crime was committed. It would not be the same if in the final scene Miss Marple or Inspector Poirot were to announce that they had no idea who had committed the heinous act; as a reader, I at least would feel resentful that the murderer had not been revealed. Yet, I do expect to be fooled several times by a detective novel. In this way, Brooks understands Barthes' hermeneutic code as *detours*. The genre of the detective novel demands that the reader be led up blind alleys and fed false information by characters who wish to mislead: but detours happen in all forms of narrative. Long passages of dialogue can be seen as providing a detour, in which we may find out about the thoughts and feelings of a character, which in and of itself are not crucial to the plot, but serve no other purpose than to enrich the narrative and slow down (or speed up) the plot. Description can also draw out a narrative; pausing the plot and drawing out moments. Stoppages in a plot may cause the reader displeasure in the immediate instance, but as many successful writers know, the pain caused by stoppages, add to

[16] Abbott, 2002. p. 12.

[17] One thinks of the way in which metaphor is often used to describe inanimate objects, assigning them personality. Susan Howatch, in talking of the depiction of the cathedral in the last of the Starbridge novels, describes the building as one of the books major characters.

[18] Cobley, Paul. 2001. *Narrative*. London: Routledge. p.13.

the eventual pleasure of resolution.[19] Stoppages produce tension which in turn can produce actual physiological changes in the reader, causing them to physically experience a narrative.[20] In terms of the space which is created by a narrative, tension does exactly that. As author and editor Sol Stein explains:

The word "tension" is derived from the Latin *tendere*, meaning "to stretch." Tension is a stretching out. Think of stretching out a rubber band more and more. If you stretch it too far it will break. We experience moments of tension as seeming longer because we want the tension to end. Tension produces instantaneous anxiety, and the reader finds it delicious.[21]

Session 3: "A Crisis"

> 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. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.
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> And God said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.
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> And God said, "Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, "Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it." And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.
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> And God said, "Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth." And it was so. God made the two great lights—

[19] Ibid., p.14.
[20] Stein, Sol. 1995. *Solutions for Writers: Practical Craft Techniques of Fiction and Non-Fiction*. London: Souvenir Press. p.105.
[21] Ibid.

the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

And God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky." So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth." And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

And God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind." And it was so. God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."

God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so.

God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day." (Genesis 1:1-31)

"Many people believe that reasoning, and therefore science, is a different activity from imagining. But this is a fallacy . . . Reasoning is

constructed with movable images just as certainly as poetry is." – *Jacob Bronowski*[22]

This afternoon I want to think about how the dance partners of science and faith have influenced the way we inhabit the stories of scripture. And although we've just heard the first account of creation, I'm not really going to talk about the debate between creationists, evolutionists and those who favour intelligent design. Because although this has been a divisive issue for as long as any of us can remember, I'm really interested in how science has influenced our hermeneutics…because I have a sneaking suspicion that our course was set long before Darwin came on the scene and challenged the six day creation. So why do we read scripture differently today than people of old? I wonder whether the narratives of science really have shaped our theological imaginations and therefore the way we inhabit Biblical texts.

That the Bible contains the foundational stories of Christianity is only the beginning of the story. As Reinhold Niebuhr said: 'revelation is transfer from this history to our history.'[23] The power of any story is in its capacity to engage us, deepen understanding or affect change.

As modern Christians, we look to the Bible as a lens through which we can understand something of the meaning of life. While others may look to the natural world for answers, often we hope to find in the pages of the Bible the answers to the big questions, such as: What does an ethical life look like? Is there meaning to be found in suffering? Alongside the age-old question: Who am I?

Some struggle with this collection of ancient texts trying to decipher what they might have to say about peculiarly modern predicaments, such as the appropriateness of stem cell research, or the ethics of climate change. And it never fails to amaze me how some feel that they do in fact find, not just guidance on these complex issues, but proof-texts that allow them to proclaim knowledge of the mind of God.

I can't help feeling that, more often than not, scripture serves as less of a hermeneutical lens and more of a mirror. Instead of reading our lives and times through the lens of scripture, I would argue that the way that we read the Bible…the way that we use the Bible in theological and philosophical discourse, the way that we appropriate biblical stories in the arts, also reflects back to us something of who we are. Western society and culture is intimately bound with the Bible, our readings of the Good Book are, in part, an elaborate dance with our own reflections.

So, how are we reading the Bible now? The Bible often seems to be one of the main sites of our division as Christians, or at least we designate it as our battleground. How the biblical texts should be read and appropriated for theological reflection is

[22] Rocke, Alan J. 2010. *Image and Reality: Kekulé, Kopp, and the Scientific Imagination*. University of Chicago Press.

[23] Niebuhr, H. Richard. 2006. *The Meaning of Revelation*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

the source of much mud flinging between liberals and evangelicals, Catholics and Calvinists, and just about every other fake binary pairing you care to propose.

Liberals and Catholics accuse evangelicals of Biblicism, in other words, holding too rigidly to the literal sense of the Bible, accepting only scripture as a source of knowledge and authority. While evangelicals accuse liberals of preferencing other sources over the Word of God and twisting words of scripture to fit their political and social agendas.

The Evangelical Alliance say this on their website:[24]

> "Many who call themselves (or are called) liberal Christians might also have a high view of the Bible, but what distinguished classical liberal theology as it developed in the 19th century was a conviction that our experience or understanding, or something nebulous called 'progress' could correct the Bible; evangelicals stood against this - and will continue to do so when it occasionally re-appears."

Whereas, they argue:

> "Evangelicals have generally affirmed a 'plain sense' way of reading the Bible - the text means what it looks like it means; this is not to say that evangelicals are naively literalist… where the form of the text requires a non-literal reading, a 'plain sense' reading is necessarily non-literal."

They go on to say that:

> "Evangelicals will also tend to agree with the classical Reformation position that "scripture is its own interpreter": where a passage is obscure, or can be read in more than one way, it should be read so as to agree with a clearer or less ambiguous passage found elsewhere in the Bible. Underlying this is the conviction that, in all its variety, the Bible speaks with a united, if complex and polyphonous, voice, and so we should not find contradictions."[25]

Liberal interpreters of the Bible try to engage with reason, tradition and experience when interpreting scripture. Scripture is not the dictated word of the Holy Spirit, but rather, the Word as written down by unreliable human narrators who told the stories in ways that reflected their own social, ethical and theological concerns. Hence there are four different Gospels, each telling the tale of Jesus's life from their own point of view, even when, in the case of the three synoptic Gospels, the

[24] https://www.eauk.org/

[25] http://www.eauk.org/church/resources/theological-articles/evangelicals-and-the-bible.cfm

evangelists were likely working from one source. This does not, however, mean that for liberals the Bible is any less 'true' or any less divinely inspired.

The turn to historical and form criticism saw both liberal and evangelical theologians and biblical scholars trying to read the texts in light of current historical understandings. Remember this morning, I noted the rise of the historian in the seventeenth century, and the notion that facts are not self-evident, but contextual. Scholars began to wonder how the parables would have sounded to a first century Jewish audience, how they might have heard them differently to the way we hear them. They wondered whether Isaiah was one or three writers, writing with the same authority but in different periods. And they also wondered how the transition from oral to written culture may have influenced the transmission of Israel's history.

I am of course presenting these differing approaches in an overly-simplistic way, but I think that we have reached a very strange point in our relationship with the Bible when both evangelicals and liberals tend to employ proof-texts to support their agendas… when talking about the role of women in the church or sexuality or our responsibility towards the poor (though liberals would argue that they arrive at their proof texts through a complex and reasoned hermeneutical procedure).

It is indeed a strange situation when in the US, Donald Trump quotes the Bible in order to garner the support of the evangelical Christian right as a kind of proof text that he will defend their values despite his very public disdain for those values in his own life. And as Martyn Percy, Dean of Christchurch, Oxford pointed out in a Guardian article, Franklin Graham, son of Billy Graham, 'told millions of America's evangelicals that they could vote for Trump with a clear conscience since Trump was comparable to the ancient Persian ruler Cyrus, mentioned in the Old Testament.' In other words, don't worry that he doesn't actually share your faith… better to have someone who protects your values and reclaims Washington power from them liberals! Percy goes on to say:

'…Trump, in this equation, therefore emerges as a liberator-messiah-ruler, and Washington as a kind of centralising Babylon. And you don't need to be a genius to work out that Trump is the Cyrus who delivers all God-fearing Americans from that awful prospect of the Whore of Babylon (Book of Revelation, chapters 17 and 18) living in the White House. "Drain the swamp" and "lock her up" are therefore implicit religious rallying calls, not just injudicious hate speech. These are the chants of the self-proclaimed righteous.'[26]

If ever we needed proof that it is the ear that demands the story. This kind of modern fundamentalism encourages a vehement response from that other peculiarly modern group of people… fundamentalist atheists, for it is with this kind of rhetoric… this kind of Biblical literalism that they engage. As the reformation began the march towards secularism, fundamentalism has cast its own shadow in the shape of unprecedented opposition to religion.

[26] https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/feb/06/donald-trump-faith-politics-religious-presidency

What else have we lost in this battle? Karen Armstrong in *The Case for God* argued that in the ancient world there were two recognised way of thinking, speaking and acquiring knowledge: mythos and logos. Logos, marked by reason and pragmatic modes of thought focussed on external reality. Myths were not just a collection of fantastical stories, neither were they meant to be an accurate telling of historical events. Rather, mythological stories were those that "…in some sense happened once but that also happen all the time."[27] For a time, historians told the story of the Greek Miracle – the defeat of mythos by logos – the transition from myth to reason. Few historians stand by that claim now. For the ancients, neither mode of knowing was superior to the other, they were instead complementary. Myth might not help you build a temple, but it might help you navigate the very human experiences of suffering, grief and falling in love.

Armstrong argues that during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – the time of Newton and Descartes and Galileo - logos achieved such incredible results that mythos was almost entirely discredited. Even theologians adopted the criteria of logos leading to rationalised interpretations of religions and literal interpretations of the Bible. So maybe we ought to talk of a Seventeenth Century miracle! "In their desire to produce a wholly rational, scientific faith that abolished mythos in favour of logos, Christian fundamentalists have interpreted scripture with a literalism that is unparalleled in the history of religion."

Acceptance of credal statements became the prerequisites of faith rather than the adoption of the correct psychological or spiritual posture that led you to 'make the 'truth' of the myth a reality in your own life.' Or, in the words of that great modern hymn… Shine, Jesus Shine… 'mirrored here, may our lives tell your story.'

Of course, Armstrong is in no way the first to argue for the revival of a more mythological understanding of the Bible. Lutheran theologian and professor of New Testament, Rudolf Bultmann back in the 1940s and 50s argued that we needed to 'demythologize' scripture… that is, not to stop reading scripture mythologically… that he said, would be to demythicize scripture… but rather, through a process of demythologization we could extricate the true symbolic meaning. Robert Segal gives the example of the flood. To go seeking evidence for a world-wide flood would be to demythicize the text, but to demythologize the Noah story would be to read it symbolically as a statement about the precariousness of life.

Bultmann said: "The real purpose of life is not to present an objective picture of the world as it is, but to express man's understanding of himself in the world in which he lives. Myth should be interpreted not cosmologically, but anthropologically, or better still, existentially." Bultmann thought that once the Bible was demythologized (in other words: remythologize) it would once again become compatible with the modern drive towards scientific rationalism, because the Bible

[27] Armstrong, Karen. 2010. *The Case for God: What Religion Really Means.* London: Vintage Press.

would in a sense be set free to refer once again to the transcendent, non-physical world and to our human experience of that world.[28]

Philosopher, Paul Ricouer argued that one of St Paul's most extraordinary contributions was the theme of the transformation of the reader of scripture. Ricoeur said: 'In this way he forged the central metaphor of the Christian self as Christomorphic, that is, the image of the image par excellence. A chain of glory…' by which we mirror Christ's life with our own.[29]

At the beginning of John's Gospel we are told that the word became flesh and dwelt among us. If the Christian self is Christomorphic, surely it is incumbent on us to continue to make the word flesh. Demythologizing the Bible demands of us that we acknowledge the ways in which we read and are read by the text. How our lives and culture have been formed by the grammar of the Bible… how our laws and norms have been shaped and how they in turn shape us.

Bultmann, and Armstrong after him, suggest that demythologizing the Bible is the work, not of an apologist, but of an evangelist…work that invites people into the habitus of the story and allows them to work out what it means to live out the Gospel in their own lives. This, they would argue, returns religious knowledge from a theoretical to a practical pursuit. In other words – all the mud-slinging and proof-texting are as nothing if Christians do nothing more than argue in the abstract. With a demythologised Bible, scripture is not shoe-horned into one dimension only. There is more to see…. And possibly more ground to explore together across the theological divides, in the way that scriptural reasoning has opened space to talk across the religious divide. Because we must find a way to change the conversation… if we don't, then we have to expect to see the Bible being reduced to a political punchline, a shibboleth to be adopted by those who would seek to deepen the divisions in our churches and in our society.[30]

Michael Meade, mythologist and one of the most important voices in the modern men's movement, argued:

> "Literalism is the great spell that binds and blinds the modern world. The lack of inspiration and loss of imagination that have become characteristic of modern societies stem in major part from darkness and blindness caused by seeing the world as literal and time as linear."

As the stories of science have been opening us up to awe and wonder, as they have arguably resacralized our vision of the cosmos, many of our readings Biblical texts have been literalised and reduced to the very least that they can be. Sara Maitland

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[28] See Segal, Robert. 2015. *Myth: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[29] Ricoeur, Paul. 1995. The Summoned Subject in the School of the Narratives of the Prophetic Vocation. In *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative and Imagination*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

[30] Just to make absolutely clear, I don't think you need to throw the baby out with the bathwater in order to find some of what Bultmann says as useful! There are some rabbit holes even I can't follow him down…

has suggested, "Our myth muscles are atrophying, with this goes our access to allegory, metaphor and sacrament."[31]

The march of science has often been blamed for encroaching secularisation, and to some extent it is true that the success of science turned the heads of theologians and Biblical scholars of every school. But in leaving behind mythos I believe the church lost something sacramental.

Stories gives us the time and space in which we can flex our sacramental imagination. And I wonder if it is possible that the new stories that science is telling might help us revive the stories of our faith? Stories can expand our horizons, subvert our presuppositions, and reorient us towards our world. We can imagine anew our place in creation, how we are called to continue God's work. And perhaps, when we least expect it, we might find ourselves up the mountain face to face with the God of story – our hearts on fire with that thing we call faith.

Session 4: "Denouement"

> "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people." (John 1:1-4)

These are the words with which I began, the divine syllable, the beginning of all our stories."It's all a question of story," wrote eco-theologian Thomas Berry. "We are in trouble just now because we do not have a good story. We are in between stories. The old story. The account of how the world came to be and how we fit into it, is no longer effective. Yet we have not learned the new story."[32]

Has the story that the church is telling become stuck within a Newtonian framework? Is it time that we learned a new story… a new song? What would happen if we allowed the changing stories told by science to interact with the changing stories of the church? What if we left behind the seventeenth century atomistic world view that allows the church to think of itself as a collection of individuals… so that when one of those individuals abuses another, we - the royal 'we'- can distance ourselves from the outrage and take no responsibility… after all it was just one faulty cog in the mechanism, not the whole church that is at fault. What would happen if we stopped seeing the individual penitent, the individual convert, the individual giver as the basic unit of what we do and how we measure our success?

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[31] Maitland, Sara. 2000. Religious experience and the novel: A problem of genre and culture." In *The Novel, Spiritualit, and Modern Culture*, by M.J. Townsend, pp. 89-90. Cardiff: University of Wales Press.

[32] Berry, Thomas. 1988. *The Dream of the Earth.* San Francisco: Sierra Club Books. p. 123

What if we took seriously the new story being told by science… a story in which time and space are part of a continuum, a story in which matter is made up of complex webs of relationship and interconnectedness is at the heart of all that is. A story in which particles that have interacted with one another continue to be entangled even when they are separated by vast distances – possibly the spookiest phenomena of quantum mechanics to date. What if we start seeing all of nature, all of the cosmos, as an undivided wholeness? How might this impact our Newtonian church? How would this new worldview shape our thinking about Christ and his place in the cosmos? Could the new sciences help us get back to telling the story of a world that isn't just mechanistic but deeply creative and mysterious and numinous?

I think that is beginning to happen. In fact, if I'm honest, I think this story was being told by the mystics of our faith centuries before the apple fell on Isaac's head or Einstein wrote down $E = mc^2$.

My own interest in science and theology developed when, as a postgraduate working on the Rhineland mystic, Hildegard of Bingen, I came across the intricate mandalas contained in her manuscript *Scivias*. The universe they portrayed was not one based on the bog-standard medieval cosmology of microcosm and macrocosm, it went beyond and described matter pregnant with spirit and the interpenetration of divine and mundane spheres. Though her cosmology did not directly challenge the science or theology of the time, she harmonised the two realms because she was concerned to emphasize the fundamental unity behind all of creation which existed in the mind of God even before it came into being. (Mews)

Barbara Newman, that great scholar of Hildegard said: "Hildegard's keen sense of divine immanence led her to envisage the creative power not as a force propelling the world from without but as an ambiance enfolding it and quickening it from within." In *Scivias*, Hildegard wrote in the voice of the living light:

> "I, the highest and fiery power, have kindled every spark of life, and I emit nothing that is deadly. I decide on all reality…. I, the fiery life of divine essence, am aflame beyond the beauty of the meadows, I gleam in the waters, and I burn in the sun, moon, and stars. With every breeze, as with invisible life that contains everything, I awaken everything to life… and thus I remain hidden in every kind of reality as a fiery power."

She goes on to identify the fiery figure as love. The all creative, all sustaining, all embracing power of the Godhead. And humanity's route to holiness in this world ablaze with God's love is in our ability to recognise our own divine nature. We are created and creative.

In our own time, Sr. Ilia Delio points to the work of the Jesuit scientist and mystic, Teilhard de Chardin whose philosophical and theological writings were supressed by the church, in part because of the challenge his thinking posed to atomistic theology. Teilhard agreed with Darwin in that he believed that given

enough time things come together and complexify – and that this leads to rising consciousness. He thought that nature wasn't finished – it is future-oriented and possesses the creativity to transcend itself. He was part of a movement that recognised that consciousness is not distinct from matter but part of the natural world… that mind gives rise to matter, it is an emerging process (or as Delio puts it, a wave - relationality and flow of information.) Like Hildegard before him, Teilhard recognised that there was an inner depth to the universe and that this force that within and without is a force of attraction to the deep centre, and like Hildegard he names this force as Love.

Delio reminds us that energy is relational – it is always a 'we' before an 'I', as if our theology hadn't already told us of this fundamental concept of a Trinitarian God. And this love energy orients us to further complexity, to more 'being'.

Teilhard's cosmology was Eucharistic. Towards the end of his life, he moved away from the traditional notion of transubstantiation as taught by his church to what he described as 'Pleromisation' which means to bring the fullness of Christ into the world. Priesthood, then, (both lay and ordained) was a ministry of Eucharistic transformative action – a work that all humans could participate in regardless of their field. It is our action within creation that is our act of communion.

Teilhard said:

> "In action, first of all, I adhere to the creative power of God; I coincide with it; I become not only its instrument but its living extension. And as there is nothing more personal in beings than their will, I merge myself, in a sense, through my heart, with the very heart of God. This contact is continuous because I am always acting."

It is through our participation that we are consummated, and like the actual Eucharist, human action is a concrete part of the restoration of the world in Christ.

> "We may, perhaps imagine that the creation was finished long ago. But this would be quite wrong. It continues still more magnificently, and at the highest levels of the world. 'The whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now' And we serve to complete it, even by the humblest work of our hands. This is, ultimately, the meaning and value of our acts."

The Christ of Teilhard was the carpenter from Nazareth, but he was also the "Alpha and Omega, the principle and the end, the foundations stone and the keystone, the plenitude and the planifier… the one who consummates all things and gives them their consistence." The Christ Teilhard speaks of is not only the very human historical Jesus, he is the Cosmic Christ through whom all came into being.

But, it isn't just the Teilhard scholars who are refocussing on a creative use of older Christian theology and symbolism. In the last year both Rowan Williams and Richard Rohr have published books that beg a corrective in our Christology. Rowan Williams's book 'Christ the Heart of Creation' is a re-engagement with the theology of the Fourth Century and argues that Jesus's human life was not an interruption to his existence as God's Eternal Word and that the infinite and finite are not in completion. Richards Rohr's slightly more accessible 'The Universal Christ' again criticises the move in theology to limit Christ to the historic person of Jesus. He reminds readers that Christ is not Jesus's last name and in the appendix of his book he maps out four world views that we might inhabit at any one time…

1) The material worldview – outer, visible world, consumerism
2) The spiritual worldview – primacy and finality of spirit, interior focussed
3) The priestly worldview – held by priests and scientists etc – help people connect the previous two worldviews – but presupposes there are two world that need connecting
4) The incarnational worldview – matter and spirit have never been separate. Matter and spirit reveal and manifest each other… found in the theology of the Eastern Fathers, the Celts and the mystics. His shortcut for this world view is the word CHRIST.

If I had time I could talk about Philip Newell's reclamation of Celtic theology, and many, many others who are working to correct the atomistic theologies of the church. I haven't gone anywhere near John Polkinghorne's work nor the process theology of Alfred North Whitehead and those who followed him.

So maybe, in different outposts of theological thought, the stories of the New Science are helping us re-invigorate the stories we tell about our faith – imbibing them with a little more awe and wonder. And maybe helping us express, as David Grummet so eloquently put it, '…the dignity, drama and grandeur of the life lived in Christ.'

Elizabeth Box Price, Emeritus professor at Phillips Theological Seminary, in an article I wish I could make everyone read entitled 'Christian Nurture and the New Cosmology', wrote of a course she devised so that Christian Religious Education could participate in the process of reframing our cosmology.[33] This was a course that aimed to not eliminate one way of knowing and replace it with another – it incorporated scientific empirical detail with primordial poetic visions of the cosmos. This wasn't just a course that taught participants the story of the New Science, it integrated the experience of watching the movement of the stars – the theory in action. They sat in silence on the prairies contemplating that there is no new water on earth, only that which has been recycled. The same water that dolphins have swam

[33] Price, Elizabeth B., 2008. Christian nurture and the new cosmology. *Religious Education*, *103*(1), pp.84-101.

in, the water we were baptised in. The molecules we breathe in were in the very air that Jesus breathed. The imagination and the senses were engaged as well as brains. Box said:

> "It was true, through the imaginative power of our senses, and the courage for re-education our subjectivity was transformed. We had truly entered into a visceral knowledge of the new cosmology… the course formed a community of learners that developed a shared consciousness regarding cultural narratives and myths that can impact attitudes and values. The course explored how these may be changed by new narratives appropriate for sustainable and flourishing ways of living. This community was able to dwell with despair, and yet embrace a new vision of what our role and place can be in the universe – a vision of illumined hope and the will to act."

Thomas Berry said that we need a new story – I'm not so sure we do. But I do think we need to be more attentive to the stories we tell, and we shouldn't be afraid to engage our scientific and theological imaginations in our work of faith.