

Telling Our Stories¹

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Recently I uploaded a video I created to my *velvethummingbee* YouTube channel. It's about a real figure from history called the Childe of Hale, real name John Middleton. He lived from 1578 to 1623 and made a mark on history because of his height, he was reputed to be 9 ft 3 inches tall.

He was a person of very humble origins who grew up on the estate of Sir Gilbert Ireland in this remote place called Hale in Lancashire. But his life was changed by his remarkable height. He encountered the King, King James I, the King who, among other things, gave us the Authorized Version of the Bible. He was taken to Oxford where he literally made such an impression – of his hand – that years later Samuel Pepys was taken to see it. He ended his days as a ploughman.

But I tell his full story in the video.² What I would like to do now is reflect, for a moment, on the nature of stories. The Childe of Hale has a lot in it. It is based on fact, we know pretty certainly when he was born and when he died. We know, we think, where he was buried, indeed, we can see his grave, but then again we can't really be 100% sure about that. So we have facts, but they might be questionable in part for their exactness. We know, we think, where he lived. We have portraits of him. These are all facts and we might say, artifacts, which we can use to interpret and understand. His story also contains legend, which is just that, although sometimes that is not an easy thing to disentangle from fact. But it all happened a long time ago yet because of its interest and vitality it has remained a story from that time to this. It must contain some inner spark that continues to connect with people.

It lives on in memory, not in individual memory obviously, but in communal memory and in oral as well as written history. For about four years I played my part in its continuation as oral history because when I was a student I worked as a guide in Speke Hall, a sixteenth-century Tudor Manor House, where the story was told every day. The Childe of Hale had lived near to this house and his picture hung in the Great Hall. One of the stories that every visitor expected to hear was the story of the Childe of Hale and each of the guides told the story in their own way in the hour that it took to go round the Hall.

It was an interesting job and one of the things that I learned doing it, subliminally really, was the power of the story. How do you communicate the history of a landed estate

across five centuries? There are lots of ways, of course, and it could be boring, it could be technical, it could be detailed, it could be good or bad, but the most effective way is by telling the stories that go with it.

This was what people wanted to hear, the stories: the ghost story, the story of eavesdropping, the story of the yew trees Adam and Eve, the story of the hiding places, the priest holes, the story of the genealogical overmantel, the story of the Childe of Hale. All the stories added up and they told the careful listener about the social, religious, political and economic history of Britain if they wanted to hear that. But the stories appealed on a very direct level, they spoke directly to people's curiosity and wonder and if they left with nothing else they left with the stories.

Now the storyteller is often a very important person in any culture and continues to be important today, not least in our society. But stories are important too in religion and in religious life and in religious identity.

So obviously stories are important in the Bible. In many ways the Bible is a series of stories, some say it is one long story, but its essence is as a story.

In our first reading³ we heard one of the best known stories from the Old Testament. It is a story that everyone knows, an amazing exciting, miraculous story. And who on hearing it does not think of Cecil B. de Mille and the Biblical epics as Moses marches across the Red Sea with the Israelites to safety as the Sea parts while the pursuing Egyptians are engulfed in the same Sea as it closes in on them.

We all know it or we think we know it but we may all have different interpretations or understandings. What there is not is one single explanation. For some it is just a miracle. The Sea opens up for Israelites and closes on the Egyptians. But again this is a story that is a mixture of facts and legend and we make our choice on the point where we feel, as individuals where we perceive truth to be.

Recently I was listening on Radio 4's 'The Life Scientific' to Sir Colin Humphreys, a scientist who is also a very committed Christian. What he wanted to do was make sense of the stories in the Bible – this one and many others – directly in line with what he knew as scientific facts. So how could one reconcile this incident on the bed of a sea where the waves part with the laws of physics? Well Colin Humphreys looked into the propensity of certain

winds in the Middle East and found that in certain conditions they could cut their way through seas, a process known as wind set-down. So he figured that was the explanation.

A different interpretation, which I have to say I favour, is to do with the interpretation of the passage. Although we always say 'Red Sea', and we know where the Red Sea is and what it looks like, some modern versions of the Bible don't translate that part as Red Sea, they translate it as the sea of reeds. This is a different proposition, but it is easily understood. A lightly armed army on foot running for their lives can get across a sea of reeds, a marsh, if they know a secure route:

And the people of Israel went into the midst of the sea on dry ground, the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left. (14:22)

By contrast a heavily armed mechanised collection of chariots would not get over a marsh, a sea of reeds, they would sink in the mud:

The Egyptians pursued, and went in after them into the midst of the sea, all Pharaoh's horses, his chariots and his horsemen.

The Lord...looked down upon the host of the Egyptians, and discomfited the host of the Egyptians, clogging their chariot wheels so that they drove heavily...(14: 23-25)

I think that makes sense. But the important thing really is the outcome. This is a story of escape, of liberation. This is what we learn from this, however we understand the details. But there is no one correct answer, there is room to discuss and debate, to use our reason and our minds to analyse the story, and when we have done that we are rewarded with a deeper sense of what the story might mean to the Israelites and to us.

And in terms of religious tradition stories are also important and if we abandon those stories we lose our identity, we lose our whole *raison d'être*. In his book on the Philosophy of Religion David Pailin, says that members of churches in the West Indies ask of new entrants to the ministry, 'Can he tell the stories'? This is the chief requirement in some people's eyes, of ministry. It suggests a relationship between the story and the ongoing religious identity.

It is the same for us. Whenever I have to be involved in supervising or validating someone's training for the ministry in our tradition I always ask the student, what have you done in terms of the history of the church? Not everyone likes this and usually the answer is

not very much. But what I am asking is if they could tell the stories, in this case the stories of our denomination, of our particular religious tradition. Because once we cease to tell those stories, once we cease to know them and to honour them, then we also cease to be Non-Subscribing Presbyterians or Unitarians. It is an essential skill, I think, for all new entrants to the ministry.

Over the period of the European Heritage Open Days this year at Dunmurry we looked at our specific ethos, about what being a Non-Subscribing Presbyterian actually means. It is important to do this anyway, from time to time, but in case anyone came to church during this special period of opening it was worth saying something about who we are. Because we do have a special mission, we have a purpose, a calling. This is explained through our stories.

For us a lot of those stories are bound up with Henry Montgomery and with the different ministers who served the church at different times over the last three centuries and the people who founded and built up the various congregations through those years.

But if we have to look for a starting point in Ireland, if we have to look for a moment when our identity solidifies then we can find it on 9 December 1719. We can be quite specific about this because this was the day that John Abernethy preached his sermon entitled *Religious Obedience Founded on Personal Persuasion*.

Now 9 December 1719 wasn't a Sunday and it wasn't a sermon preached to a church congregation. It was a Wednesday and it was preached before the Belfast Society, a group of ministers who met to discuss theology, pastoral care, the Bible and the nature of religious faith. It was preached in Belfast so most likely it was in either the First or Second congregation on Rosemary Street, both buildings now long gone as they were replaced in subsequent centuries.

In the sermon Abernethy basically does two things. Based on the reading from Romans he points out the individual responsibility of each person to decide for themselves and he emphasises the central position of the God-given faculty of reason in determining religious truth.

But this is the moment the first gleams of the enlightenment enter Belfast religious life and more particularly Presbyterian life. This is the moment we move from the frozen Calvinism of the previous 150 years, from a narrow and unbending view of religion in which

one was being told what to believe, a theological world which was defined solely by sin and a sense of separation from God to one that looked at the place of faith in the whole world and looked at each individual as a child of God and said to them it is your duty and your responsibility to make these decisions. No one can tell you what to believe, faith is not defined by subscribing to someone else's formularies no matter how exalted they might be.

The story of Abernethy's sermon is an interesting one because it does mark a change, a sort of hinge in the history of religious progress. In its own way it is our own Belfast Reformation, every bit as important as the previous reformations instituted by Martin Luther or Ulrich Zwingli or John Calvin or John Knox.

The Belfast Society had been meeting for about 12 years and it must have been a very useful society for ministers and some lay people to meet and discuss, to study and share ideas, to talk about the latest theological books, to ask questions. It was based on something most of them had encountered when they were at university in Glasgow, and a great many of them studied at Glasgow. There the professor of theology encouraged them to meet in groups once a week to share their thoughts and their observations and what seems to have happened is that when they returned to Ireland they carried on doing the same thing.

Now we know that after 1719 not every Presbyterian becomes a Non-Subscriber and those who rejected our way of thinking tended to be very critical of the Belfast Society and the people who were in it. But what could be more innocent than a gathering to keep everyone up to speed with the latest theology and to examine the Bible and discuss the issues that arose? This is exactly what they did. So, for instance, to save money someone would be chosen to buy the latest book, they would read it and present a paper on it at the next meeting so everyone could learn about it. They raised questions about how to deal with issues that had arisen in their churches, they shared their knowledge and reflections.

So this is how the Belfast Society developed. But ideas have a habit of gaining a momentum on their own and this reached a critical point in 1719 with John Abernethy's sermon. We know that no less a place than Geneva, the home of John Calvin, stopped subscription in 1706. We know also that Benjamin Hoadly, the Bishop of Bangor, preached before the King in 1715 and told him that Christ alone was the supreme law giver and that all humanity, including the King, was subject to him alone. A brave thing to do but the suggestion was being made that human formularies, human doctrines were coming between people and God.

In Ireland all this came into focus within Presbyterianism in the form of John Abernethy, and the ideas that he put forward built on this, a new, radical departure that became the basis for our denomination but surely remains true to this day for anyone who reflects on the nature of faith.

In the following year his sermon, *Religious Obedience founded on Personal Persuasion*, was published in Belfast and the controversy over subscription began. We have a copy in our library here. But this was our story of origin. It is from this Belfast-based Reformation in 1719 and 1720 that we develop and all this is still relevant today. A sermon preached in and published in this city by the first printers to establish a press here. It asks questions like: Where does authority lie in religion? Is it written in a creed or a statement of faith, does it belong to some Council or Assembly? Or does it lie with the individual person who has to use their own reason, their own understanding to come to terms with faith?

This is our story and everyone should know it and relate to it because in the end it is what makes us Non-Subscribers. It's a story about John Abernethy and his colleagues, but also about the early history of the city of Belfast. It is a story about religion, about Presbyterianism, but it is also a story about the rights of the individual. It is a story about how we understand the Bible but it is also a story about how we understand ourselves. It is a story that has been interpreted in different ways and argued over. It is a story that also contains legend and mystery. What happened to John Abernethy's six volume diary which disappeared and which some claim is hidden away to prevent people seeing it? But above all it is our story and when we know the stories we understand better who we are and what our role in the world is.

¹ A sermon originally preached at First Dunmurry (Non-Subscribing) Presbyterian Church on Sunday, 3rd September 2023.

² The video can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uWC-Y-6fA-c>

³ Exodus ch.14 v.19-31.