

DOING THE STORY

Jill Harris

Jill Harris, formerly a post primary teacher and librarian, is a Wellington writer of books for older children (Sil, 2005, and Missing Toby, to be published later this year) and poetry. She also creates liturgies drawing on a wide variety of resources to explore life and faith from a non-theistic point of view. The liturgies have been prepared over the past 15 years for use by the Wellington Ephesus Group, a group which pursues new ways of understanding and expressing Christian faith in the secular world of New Zealand in the new millennium.

“Once upon a time when men and animals talked together and gods walked the earth ...”

“In a certain kingdom there lived a poor miller who had a beautiful daughter.”

“A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers.”

“In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit.”

Oh, the compelling magic of the opening words of a story! We’re hooked immediately. Every storyteller knows how vital they are - whole manuscripts are turned inside out to get them right.

And once we’re hooked, we’re avid to know what happens next. We weigh the character and behaviour of the protagonists – what would we have done? We critique the plausibility of the plot - could that really have happened? And the credibility of the insights on life – is that actually how things are?

Our lives are dense with story. Think of novels, gossip, newspapers, histories, memoirs. Think also of the narratives that run in our heads as we play and replay bits of the absorbing story of our own lives. We see ourselves caught up in the drama of life, endlessly analysing, revisiting, fantasising. And what about dreams, that alternative version of our lives? As Prospero says in *The Tempest*: “We are such stuff as dreams are made on ...”

The world is brimming over with stories, ancient and modern. Stories have always been used to entertain, inform, guide, illuminate, control, inspire, warn, transform. The trappings change with time and place, but the truths, the learnings, the insights are carried across the centuries. Think of:

Icarus who flies too close to the sun

The tortoise who wins the race through dogged perseverance

The man who overcomes his prejudice to help the victim of an attack

The God who comes to earth and dies so that we have to take over his work ourselves.

Story is compelling because it tells us who we are and how we live. It is the raw material of all the creative arts from literature to dance to painting. In almost every artistic endeavour there is a story or the fragment of a story somewhere in the background. All of these imaginative endeavours shape the interpreting and living of our lives.

And that is also true of ritual - another of the performing arts which uses words, actions, stage props, architecture, music, dance and visual display to tell a story; a story so important to the survival of a particular group that its telling and retelling are not left to chance.

This is how we hunt and kill a bison

This is what happens when the world goes to war

This is how vulnerable love can transform relationships.

This is the stuff of religion – defined by Della Casa as “a total mode of the interpreting and living of life”. Howard Brenton is the British author of a powerful, new play called Paul, about Paul of Tarsus, St Paul of the New Testament. In the programme notes for the Sydney production this year Brenton says: “God talks to us in stories. Stories are religion.”

Think of ANZAC Day ceremonies. For growing numbers of New Zealanders each year, a story is re-told, values reinforced, warnings sounded. And how is that done? Through ritual which engages heart and mind and imagination.

Waitangi Day is increasingly being marked by ceremonies around the country in which the story of Aotearoa-New Zealand is told.

And take Christmas: an old story is repeated, embroidered, reinterpreted and the message of love, goodwill, generosity, vulnerability and innocence is set forth. Most will respond to the humanity of the story, some will ponder deeper meanings. And the season abounds with rituals both public and private, superficial and profound, secular and religious.

Stories are expressed in the manner of their times, of course. When we re-tell old stories peopled with magicians, dragons and goblins, we happily suspend our disbelief - or we re-interpret them. Each of us, I’m sure, could bring to mind a film or book or poem or dance or play which has taken an old story and an old truth and brought it into the 21st century: same message, new trappings; the familiar in unfamiliar garb.

The retelling of stories in which the familiar is refreshed by the unfamiliar, an old truth contexted in a contemporary setting, has been going on forever. Shakespeare was a master at this; so were the writers of the gospels whose accounts of the life of Jesus were drawn as much from their own convictions and the needs of their communities as from the historical realities. And Paul of Tarsus who reinterpreted the life and death of Jesus to build a theological structure that went global – now there was a re-telling of a story!

This retelling of faith stories is an ongoing theological process. My address today is predicated on the fact that many people who still see value in the Christian way, are caught up in this process every day as the old stories bump up against a vastly changed world view. Although I have long rejected the literalism of the traditional Christian stories, I find life-anchoring importance in the truths they convey about life. So I am committed to re-telling those stories in a way which can be heard in our own time. ‘A religious myth loses its vitality when the world-view underlying it undergoes a sea-change,’ wrote Ian Harris in his Honest to God newspaper column earlier this year. We have to ‘... break the myth open and recover its meaning for our own time.’

Sermons in church also re-tell the stories but then what happens? After this nod in the direction of the contemporary, the ritual – the liturgy – the church service - slips back into the old assumptions about God as conveyed in the prayers, the hymns, and the Bible readings.

Some of us here are thoroughly familiar with the telling of stories through rituals. Once we participated in such rituals in church throughout the year. Think of Palm Sunday, Easter, Pentecost and Christmas. But we are also here because those rituals gradually fell out of step with our lives. We may feel acute nostalgia for them but they don’t meet our needs any longer.

Is it the stories or the rituals which are the problem? I think it’s the rituals. We can and do constantly re-context old stories but ritual, that more formal, communal story-telling, no longer has a regular place in our public life, and is not seen as valuable.

Is that what we think?

Margaret Somerville, world-renowned ethicist from McGill University, asserts that through collective participation in ritual people experience respect, reverence and transcendence. It is only through revitalising ritual, she says, that we can find the connections we need to experience and nurture the human spirit collectively.

I belong to a group in Wellington called the Ephesus Group, most of us former church members, some still currently so, who create rituals – liturgies we call them – which attempt to express a contemporary understanding of Christianity. Even though liturgy is one of those words which are a turn-off to some people because of past associations, we use it because its Greek meaning is ‘the work of the people’ and we place a lot of emphasis on participation in the creating and enacting of a liturgy.

The Ephesus Group says:

Yes to those ancient truths about human life; but no to the pre-modern world view through which they were originally expressed.

Yes, to the sublime words, music and other works of art which have come out of Christianity; no to stopping there and not seeking contemporary liturgical expression of the truths we live by.

We say yes to new ways of ritualising the telling of important faith stories; but no to liturgies which do not express the realities of our time.

And no, especially, to abandoning altogether participation in rituals which can give form and focus to what we believe and how we live. Who would want to turn their backs on what Professor Tom Driver calls “transformative ritual – the opening of a window, the casting of a net, the hurling of a cry into the night!”

Doesn’t that make you just tingle with excitement! He’s saying that ritual is the place where we push back our horizons, let in new ideas, speculate about life and meaning, explore new possibilities, look into our hearts, face up to pain and uncertainty, and feel release and joy; the place where we say ‘sorry’ and ‘thank-you’ and ‘help me’ and ‘yippee!’.

This is how the Ephesus Group defines ritual:

Ritual is a way of meeting religious needs, in company with others, by:

- **Making sense of our experience**
- **Expressing what is of ultimate worth to us**
- **Reaching out beyond where we are**
- **Strengthening community**
- **Tapping into a particular faith tradition**
- **Defining our framework for living**
- **Invoking transforming power(s)**
- **Envisioning the re-ordering of the world**

The Ephesus Group tries, through ritual, to re-frame for our own times the stories from the Christian tradition which have helped to shape western civilisation, and which still influence our lives 2000 years later.

We hunt for words and music, images and actions to express our experience liturgically – experience of a secular world, of our understanding of what it means to be religious, of our reflection on being human on a finite planet in an infinite universe. We use anything and everything: the poetry of Jenny Bornholt or Maria Rainer Rilke; Yates Garden Guide or a novel by Doctorow; ancient Christian prayers and hymns; contemporary NZ music. We are not purists – we stand in a tradition: the Bible, a 13th century prayer of St Francis of Assisi, a Christmas carol are all resources to be used – and interpreted - as need be.

But the overall trend is inexorable - to liturgy which is not underpinned by belief in a personal, supernatural God.

- **Over the past 15 years we have created liturgies around Easter, exploring whether words like sin, salvation, redemption, and resurrection are usable any more;**

- **We have dug into why we want to hold on to Christmas.**
- **We have asked whether ideas of transcendence, the numinous, the sacred need a theistic concept of God to give them meaning.**

Take the stories of angels, for example. Angels have staged a bit of a comeback in recent years: think of *The Vintner's Luck* by Elizabeth Knox. There are 275 references to angels in my Bible concordance. Angels are seen as a symbol of communication between God and human beings – a convention like Shakespeare's ghosts who always signal revenge. They are also associated with the breaking-in of the unpredictable, the prompting of intuition and inspiration, divine wrath as well as divine succour. For us, today, angels are metaphorical pointers to other dimensions in life – the transcendent, if you like.

One year the Ephesus Group created a Christmas liturgy entitled *Angels and Other Dimensions*. Let me share a little of it with you. The traditional 'call to worship', which sets the scene for the church service, has been replaced with another kind of introduction.

First, an example of a traditional call, taken from A New Zealand Prayer Book

**We have come before God's holy mountain:
the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God;
we have come before myriads of angels
in festal gathering ...
Let us therefore give thanks to God,
thus offering acceptable worship
with reverence and awe
for our God is a consuming fire.**

Now, the Ephesus Introduction:

ANGELS AND OTHER DIMENSIONS
An Ephesus Liturgy

**In the shadows cast by sunlight
in the prism of metaphor & symbol
in the echoes & harmonics of music
in the subtleties of many-layered words
in the hidden worlds of quantum physics
& the deep universe
in the weave of human interplay - the glance
the touch, the otherness, the commonality,
we recognise the richness of dimension.**

You have there two very different approaches to angels!

I'd like to share one other Ephesus liturgy with you as a further example of how an old story can be re-told liturgically for today.

This liturgy explores one of the foundation myths of Christianity: the story of the last meal Jesus shared with his disciples. This story was so important to the early followers of Jesus that they did the age-old thing of embedding it in a ritual to ensure it got told and re-told. They took over the Jewish ritual of the special meal before the Sabbath and gave it a new significance. Breaking bread and drinking wine with companions around a table became potent symbols of the violent death of a revered leader, his – and their - triumph over that

death and defeat, and the emergence of a community to hold fast to the vision of life he revealed.

What a story they were telling: betrayal, anguish, self-doubt, agony, denial, execution, defeat and – against the odds – the re-emergence of hope and resolution; all powerfully symbolised in breaking open a loaf of bread.

In due course, a huge edifice of theology developed around the story and the ritual – a theology many no longer believe. But we don't have to subscribe to ideas like the incarnation of a God up there in Jesus down here, his bodily resurrection and ascension to heaven, his sacrifice and atonement for our sins, to recognise a story of great truth and power. Seeing ourselves as standing in the long tradition of the breaking of bread, the Ephesus Group set out to re-configure the story and the ritual.

We called our liturgy *Many Tables* to point up that ancient, universal tradition, and to emphasise the sharing of a meal – a universal human activity which is, itself, dense with ritual.

In our reinterpretation of the story, a God came to earth and died - but he didn't return to heaven. He stayed - and passed on to us his work of transformation. It's up to us to take responsibility for ourselves and our planet, because nobody else will do it!

Let's look at some short excerpts from the liturgy.

First, our introduction:

MANY TABLES **An Ephesus Liturgy**

Introduction

We are now going to share bread and wine together as Christians have done for 2000 years. We bring to this ancient ritual our own needs and understandings, but also see ourselves as standing in a tradition which stretches unbroken across the centuries. When we speak of the Christ, we refer to the mythic creation of the church - a symbol of transforming power at work in the world.

Central to the liturgy is a litany in which the leader speaks and the group responds.

Leader

**For myth to break and pass around,
to dip in wine and savour, flavour of
this world's life, this, our home;**

**For the God who stayed and died
and yielded up his power
that we might shape the world for good
or ill - salvation or destruction
for our planet, ourselves and one another.**

All For this bounty, we give thanks.

The liturgy moves on to the breaking of bread.

Breaking the bread

The two leaders stand side by side at the table: one breaks the bread and holds it high while the other says:

**For bread to break and pass around,
from ages past what we have done
to celebrate community and tell the story
of a God of flesh and blood, like us,
who trod the labyrinth and lighted us
the way - hero, victim, profoundly wise;
the best we know:
for the Christ who hosts the meal of life,**

All For this bounty, we give thanks

What on earth do we mean by ‘the Christ who hosts the meal of life’? Some of our members thought this was a throw-back to a theology we’ve moved away from – divine, supernatural, miraculous.

But we were focussing on the symbolic qualities of transcendent and transforming power and mystery, which we felt resided in the metaphor of the mythic Christ. Cosmologist Beatrice Tinsley expressed this in her poem *Let me be like Bach* when she says:

Let all my themes within – of ancient light,
Of origins, and change and human worth –
Let all their melodies still intertwine,
Evolve and merge with ever-growing unity,
Ever without fading,
Ever without a final chord ...

*For Rainer Maria Rilke, in his poem *Vast Red Dawn*, which is a re-telling of the opening words of St John’s Gospel, this is an ancient, elemental force – a ‘vast, red dawn over the plains of eternity’. It is:*

**... the deep essence of all things
Which does not reveal the final secret of its being,**

It is elusive – you can never pin it down, and it is this power and energy that sustains us, which is ‘the meal of life’.

*This was our way of re-telling and re-liturgising the myth of the Last Supper.
And talking of supper:*

Breaking the bread (continued)

**For alchemy and transformation -
each one alone, to guests at table,
circled with light and warmth, and welcomed,
hands over food, faces glowing,
leaning towards each other, eyes meeting,**

**voices rising and falling; and falling silent,
remembering what troubles lie beyond the light;**

All For this bounty, we give thanks

Incidentally, in this liturgy we used Colin Gibson's song 'Out of such sun and air/what Christ may come ...' It is a wonderfully evocative song, full of metaphor, which you can interpret however you will.

The language of imagination, of poetry, which takes off like Pegasus, is the language of religious ritual: as relevant today as ever, as we grapple with being human in a precarious world of change, a world of threat and promise. Those of us who want to affirm the truths about human life which the Christian faith has always proclaimed, who believe the myths we have inherited must be retold, have to find a new way to tell the stories and enact the rituals which reinforce them - a way which resonates with our 21st century understanding of ourselves, our planet and the universe.

I don't think it's an option to simply dismiss the stories. What will you put in their place? I think each one of us needs to decide which stories we wish to be part of in the continuing narrative of human life. And then we must find ways of expressing them, of sharing them with one another; ways which complement what we now know from science about the origins and nature of life: building on the what, to tell the why.

**Jill Harris
29 September 2007**