

Character

Living and Telling Sacred Stories

by Merryl Blair

During last year I attended, along with a colleague, a workshop run by the Story Tellers Guild of Victoria. The workshop, entitled 'Telling Sacred Stories', was led by a Jewish woman who helped us to delve down into our own stores of memories, experience and creativity to discover what makes a story sacred, and how the telling of it is also a sacred act. Most of the people present had no particular 'church' background, but all understood what was meant by 'sacred'. All were highly sensitive to the sacredness of another person's story, and made the retelling of that story a matter of high art because that was required by the nature of the story. We spent several hours exploring the story of Noah's Ark, and the telling made it our story, with its patterns and rhythms, personalities and movements, until the grace of the story had entered into each one of us, merged with the patterns and rhythms of our own lives, and carried us to another point in our own journeys by its power.

This intensified an interest I already had in exploring the being/telling of stories. My work on Jeremiah has been part of this exploration. The commentators argue about the historicity of the person Jeremiah, with hot debate running between, for example, one scholar who suggests a highly historical reading (Holladay), while on the other hand, another scholar suggests a post-exilic construction (Carroll), with every point in between being covered. Where I've found a startling lack, is in the exploration of the *character* Jeremiah, and how he works in the story. Most theological concepts in the Hebrew Bible are expressed, not through treatises or intellectual propositions, but in stories of people. Through the way people act in various situations and dilemmas, or in response to other people, the character of God (and the interplay between God and creation) is gradually unfolded. The character of Jeremiah appears to me to be a sustained exploration of this interplay, embodying as he does all of the tensions present when creation goes awry and the relationship with God is stretched to breaking point.

The theological claims of the Book of Jeremiah include issues such as God's sovereignty, moral and ethical demands, relational needs and salvific hopes. Over against these stand the realities of human existence: confusion of identity, greed, struggle for survival that often means capitulating to greater powers, etc. In the story of Jeremiah, the tension between these two are lived out as Jeremiah struggles to hear, understand and live under the claims of God, in the context of the reality of human existence. While Jeremiah is appointed "to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant" on a national scale, the point of collision between God's demands and human life occurs *within the person of the prophet*. While the macro story is played out among nations, it happens in micro in Jeremiah's own story. (Note the structure of the book, which has blocks of oracles against Israel, oracles against the nations and oracles of restoration for Israel interspersed with snippets of the prophet's own story: rejection and persecution by his own people, through to buying the field that marks the promise of return and restoration.) While we may be able to ignore or distance the macro story (what do nations have to do with the lives of ordinary people like us?), we cannot ignore the micro story, because the pain of the prophet is too personal, too easily absorbed into our own stories.

At the heart of the character Jeremiah lies the pain of the interface between divine pathos and pastoral responsibility. He not only feels God's pain and anger at the shattering of relationship with the beloved, but also the potential and actual pain of his own people living through the ensuing cataclysm. As we read along with Jeremiah, we are faced with the reality of the divine/human drama: this is no ideology, but something that affects the core of what it means to be human, alive, and part of the cosmos.

It is hard to decide whether Jeremiah's story is comedy or tragedy. On the one hand, he stays in the process despite its cost, and eventually becomes the bearer of life-giving words to the exiled people, pointing them towards new action on the part of God which may not have been possible without the presence of the mediator. On the other hand, the personal cost is so high, and there is no 'happy ever after' told us at the end of Jeremiah's own story. Why? If the character Jeremiah is there to illustrate for us the reality of being God's instrument, what does his end (not a bang, but a whimper) say?

Reading the story of Jeremiah leaves me with questions, not answers. It forces me into deeper questions about my own story, and to listen to my own story more attentively. If I am listening to my own story more attentively, I am also forced to pay closer attention to the stories of others (and hopefully can help them do the same: a major part of the process of spiritual direction). Within my own story, I have to ask what my part is in the interface between God and creation. Where is the locus of pain, and can I bear it? If I fail to bear it, what words of hope and new life cannot be incarnate? If the prophet/pastor/mediator/me fails to endure the moment of interface (which can be a hell of a long moment!), where does the process of redemption go? Why does God not allow Jeremiah to give up his commission? Is the silence surrounding Jeremiah's end a whimper, or the silence of peace? Would the addition of an ending (especially a happy one) have simply detracted from the importance of the journey, by pointing to the end as justifying the pain, and hence detracting from it? Is all this what it means to be 'priest'?

I'm not sure where I'm going with all this. I know it has something to do with finding the artistry in being/telling sacred stories, and an acceptance that even pain has a certain beauty if told with artistry. Helping people tell their own sacred stories gives a voice to powerlessness and chaos, which begins to give back power and to order chaos. Part of the telling is silence which gives space for being. Learning to allow the silence is also artistry. Good stories have repetition and patterns. Listening for these in my own story gives rhythm and cadence into which I can invite others, so that while pain may isolate, isolation eventually swings back into community (and out...and in...).

The implications of all this for ministerial formation have been stirring my imagination for quite some time. The idea of telling stories that reflect The Story is not new to any of us, but I am seeking a greater intentionality in this in my own teaching. This coheres with a view of proclamation as hearing one's own story in terms of the great themes that sweep through biblical texts, and living, teaching and ministering out of the strength of that story; helping students to do the same, so that they may continue the priestly role of creating links between story and Story in their areas of ministry. *rejo*