

# THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE OTHER

## Time and the Tangled Threads of God's Story

By MICHAEL BARNES

I grew up in a family of five rowdy brothers in suburban south London on a block which was known in the local neighbourhood as 'Pope's corner'. Next door to us lived another large Catholic family – six decidedly better-behaved sisters. One of the girls was almost exactly my age and as children we were the closest of friends. She had blue eyes and long blonde pigtails which, of course, got pulled mercilessly. For what seemed like years we did everything together. I introduced her to the excitements of the large wood round the corner, making light of the 'No Trespassing' sign and the irritated complaints of the people who lived there. She, meanwhile, introduced me to more civilized pleasures; on long summer evenings we would sit on the grass for hours contentedly reading Enid Blyton. Occasionally we went in search of adventures of our own, for which the nearby park and the wilder delights of the more distant common provided enormous scope. We got into the usual scrapes – more often than not having something to do with fences and torn trousers – which provoked the wrath of various parents, usually her father, who blamed me for turning his demure (or so he thought) daughter into a 'tomboy'.

Glimpsed in retrospect they seem like extraordinarily happy days. And even allowing for a measure of nostalgia after some forty years, there is no doubt that we enjoyed a secure childhood. As I write this article her younger daughter, my god-daughter, is preparing for her first communion. I know she enjoys the same deep security as her mother once did, but in a less innocent world she certainly cannot know the same glorious sense of freedom.

This article, however, is not about the demise of childhood, nor about the disappearance of a golden age – which probably only ever existed in our imaginations anyway. It is about the continuity of friendship and the power of story to sustain and even create shared memories – ways in which 'the other' becomes significant. My purpose

is theological. If I begin on a personal note, it is only to emphasize how much our experience of God is rooted in what is particular and deeply human. All of us can name a number of persons who speak of God to us by arousing, provoking and even frustrating our deepest longings. Lovers and friends, parents and children, teachers, personal patrons and more distant role models, call forth in us our desire to be loved. Even when we make a dismal mess of loving, Christian faith in an incarnate God goes on reminding us that *all* human relationships are significant and potentially life-giving.

Which surely raises a paradox. How can it be that our lives are often enriched by precisely those experiences which most challenge and even disorientate them? The paradox of 'the other' which is yet 'significant', the strangeness which brings meaning – this is our theme. But I run ahead of myself. Back to friendship and families and the stories we tell each other.

### *A tangle of stories*

A while ago, I was doing what all well-trained godfathers are expected to do: tell the good-night story. My friend – she was certainly the first 'significant other' outside my own family – asked me to tell her little girl a story about the grandmother she had never known. I described the kindly, unflappable body who chatted amiably over the fence, whom my own mother always described as 'a good neighbour', and who seemed to have time for everyone, even for scruffy small boys. But as I tried to make a story out of such vivid memories a different and more poignant recollection came back.

A couple of years earlier I had had the privilege of presiding and preaching at her funeral mass. Our families turned up in droves and renewed friendship amid endless gossip. We talked together and sang favourite hymns, and in my homily I did my best to combine the odd reminiscence with some suitably straightforward words about our common hope in God's future. Meanwhile, there in front of me sat my father, his memory shot to pieces by the ravages of Alzheimer's disease. Mercifully, he was having what we called one of his 'good days'. He beamed vacantly like an aged, dishevelled professor as introductions and greetings were quickly exchanged. He clearly had no idea who all these people were, nor any sense of the significance of the occasion. But somehow it did not seem to matter that he was a mere shadow of his former self. For in one way nothing had changed. We were among friends; *they* remembered even if he could not. Their presence made up for the sadness of absence. Memories crowded

together, healing and hurting, loss and fulfilment rubbing against each other, and the funeral liturgy worked its uncanny power to bring the past into the present and to express the melancholy of death and dying.

As I remembered the emotional confusion which only such an occasion can bring, suddenly the cosiness of good-night stories seemed a long way away. In telling my god-daughter one story I found myself thinking of another. Three generations, and many 'significant others'; so many stories, half-remembered, vaguely glimpsed; so many tangled threads which hang loose; continuities and discontinuities. Is there any way to hold them together?

### *A pattern of memories*

The most obvious answer is simply that 'otherness' is made significant through the stories we tell. Telling a familiar children's story (in which, of course, not a word must change, or woe betide the teller) is, in principle, no different from reading a learned work of history or the latest prize-winning novel. The imagination is stimulated; a world is created or recalled into which listeners or readers can enter at will. Whether in the act of reading, or at a stage further back in the act of writing or narrating, all our stories are attempts to incorporate disparate and diffuse experiences into the familiar narratives which guide our lives. We learn to sort the tangle into a single thread.

The stories we tell are more than chronicles or records of the past. They touch into and shape richly patterned memories of human experience which both interpret the past and help us to anticipate the future. Fact or fiction, they juxtapose familiar and unfamiliar, the same and the other. A sequence of events is described in which characters are seen to react to the introduction of some change in their relationships; hidden aspects of their situation are found to engender a new predicament which demands a resolution. To that extent, the plots we invent and the narratives we build do much more than reflect life; they create its possibilities. And they recount not just what we do but what is done to us, how we suffer, and why. In the telling they help us to understand and come to terms with life's sometimes stultifying confusion. 'We tell stories', says Paul Ricoeur, 'because in the last analysis human lives need and merit being narrated. . . . The whole history of suffering cries out for vengeance and calls for narration.'<sup>1</sup>

The art of story-telling is never 'merely' about entertainment and diversion. It also has an ethical purpose. To say that is not to reduce the entire corpus of world literature to variations of 'tales with a moral'. If there is a moral, it is the simple point behind this article: that in the

telling of stories we make everything, even the 'threads which hang loose', significant. Stories set within the genre of ancient Greek tragedy, for instance, have an almost ritual quality. They portray the 'fatal flaw' of the noble hero in such a way as to bring about a healing catharsis in the audience, a purging of the emotions. The lesson, the 'moral', of the story is that actions have consequences; debts must be paid. What we do affects others, and in the doing we are affected by 'the other'. Order is seen to triumph even if, in many instances, harmony or resolution is never complete. The epic-historical stories of so much of the Bible provide a different example. Here again is a certain ritual style, but this time the biblical narrative reminds us of a covenantal relationship which underlies all human and divine relations, emphasizing the consequences of separation from God, and warning of the chaos to come. The Greek example typically emphasizes immediate resolution while in the Bible, on the other hand, the claims of justice are met in the future. Both mix the discordant with the familiar, but in very different ways enable us to recognize the significance of our ambiguous experience of time.

Myths and fables, histories and novels, even childhood romances and tales of adventure, all reflect our need for significance and harmony, but the achievement of a resolution, whether the restoration of justice or the 'happy ending', is never straightforward. For where and when is the 'ending'? In what sense can we ever speak of 'knowing' what is past, or being sure of what the future holds? Memories sustain our hope but often the enigma of time jolts our faith. As St Augustine realized, we know that we are made for an eternity in God, yet that very knowledge makes us aware of how bound we are in time different from or 'other' than God. 'What then is time?' he asks. 'I know well enough what it is, provided that nobody asks me, but if I am asked what it is and try to explain, I am baffled.'<sup>2</sup> To be caught in the middle of the mystery of time, to be entangled in its disarmingly significant otherness, is the baffling tragedy of human beings. Only through acts of memory and anticipation – of which our stories are the most important example – can we begin to make sense of the passage of time. But we can never separate ourselves from time, never rise above it, never finish what we anticipate.

Our stories console us with an element of sameness and security but they also warn us that the stability we crave is constantly being threatened. By telling stories we bring the disparate threads together, but they often remain persistently and heart-breakingly fragile. We strive to introduce a new order into the old pattern but never quite

succeed. The best stories are not a bland progress from the introduction of characters to the eventual resolution of relationships, but a serious questioning of the very terms in which relationships are formed, a radical 'disturbance' of the *status quo*. This means that the act of 'following' the story is never easy. And in many ways the whole point of telling the story is precisely to make demands on us – some emotional investment or intellectual effort. Following the story-line may well be laborious and frustrating, especially when temporal sequences get confused, extraneous elements are introduced into the plot, our readers' prejudices and sympathies are exposed, and our expectations confounded by subtle turns and discontinuities.

An element of the discordant other disturbs yet strangely enthrals us. As such it reflects the strangeness and tragedy that besets all human living – the promise of a child set against the confusion of old age.

#### *Relating to the other*

This is the paradox behind the term 'significant other': the other signifies, despite being beyond our control. The other constantly returns from the past, as it were, to 'haunt the present'.<sup>3</sup> Our stories bear witness to this; the past may not be the present, but it is not entirely absent either. Hence the ambiguity which the word 'other' conceals. It usually means different or diverse, the second of two, the unknown which is not the same as the known. But even to say that much indicates a relationship of some kind; the other is always 'other than' something or someone else. Thus we often use the word – as in 'significant other' – to refer to someone very special, a friend so close as to be an 'other half' or 'alter ego'. Such a usage presumes that a relationship has already been established, that there is no such thing as the completely other.

That is undoubtedly true – and truly consoling. But why is it that, so often, the closest relationships cause the worst anguish and the most profound sense of separation? Perhaps the only way we can cope with difference, and the insecurity of our isolation, is by seeing in the other the fulfilment of our deepest needs. There is that in the other which draws us, which becomes intensely significant, acting as a sort of mirror-image to reflect our deepest desires. That also is true. And a warning. The danger is that we can always *use* the other for our own purposes, often through subtle forms of manipulation which minimize the distance between us. By forgetting the ethical respect which distance demands, one or other of the partners can be hurt or simply overwhelmed.

There is no need to expand on what is common experience, nor much point in agonizing over why relationships fail – there are, no doubt, myriad reasons. Better to wonder and rejoice over the fact that they can and do succeed. We need to remember that the word ‘other’ speaks of difference within a relationship, albeit tangled and open-ended. The ambiguity with which the term is used reflects the ambiguity of lives set between a past which can never be recalled and a future which is not yet – and may never be. The poignancy of a funeral is only one example. When darkness closes in, it may be a very few close friends and loved ones whose presence can help us bear what is strange and even threatening. Our ‘significant others’ represent those privileged human relationships which, at their best, reassure us that in the strangeness of absence is a not-so-hidden familiarity. More than that, they point us to an ‘otherness’ which in a mysterious way leads us over the threshold of the familiar to a world we did not, and in many ways would rather not, choose. So often it is the significant other – a childhood friend or a child absorbed in a good-night story – who reminds us of a God who never leaves us without touches and traces of God’s presence. And that is the Christian mystery: God who is totally other – unknown, not ours to control, quite beyond our grasp – but who in time becomes genuinely significant, albeit as a flicker of light dimly discerned in the darkness ahead of us.

This is the paradox of an Other who disturbs yet enthralls, and who impels us to tell each other stories. We do so not because they provide us with a store of philosophically coherent treatises which give intellectually satisfying answers. Rather, by appealing to the imagination and the emotions they buy us time; by reading, listening, or being present to a dramatic reconstruction, we become steeped in the questions they ask and the answers they propose. The recounting is itself enough. By returning us to a familiar world, forming us after the manner of high dramas, tiny rituals and traditional liturgies which place our lives in a much larger narrative, they make the ‘otherness’ in our experience significant.

In such a way the gospel story of Jesus has shaped the Church. Its daily proclamation, especially when set within the eucharistic gathering of the community, makes it possible for each person to find their place and to tell their own story. This is not to make the gospel story a magic formula, its promise of resurrection a mother’s kiss for making us feel better. It is, precisely, a story – and a threatening story at that. The pattern of Jesus’ life, in all its brokenness, teaches us that the threads with which we seek to make sense of our lives, however

entangled in our confusions, will eventually meet in God, when the freshness of childhood and the meaningless decay of old age are finally tied together.

*Making way for the other*

If that is the content, the 'message' of the story, it is also the form, the manner in which the story is recounted. The pattern must constantly be rewoven if the strange and even alien elements of our experience are to become significant and not simply other. How do we hold together the significance and the 'otherness' of our lives? My argument has been that the telling of stories enables us to come to terms with otherness, with the confusion of loss and mourning. Recounted in the present our stories link us to past and future, building in us the hope which knows that the end is 'not yet', that the best is still to come. In an obvious sense the gospel story never ends. It is constantly being re-enacted; unchanging yet never the same. How do the original storytellers end the gospel? Not with a glorious fast-fade nor with a list of heavenly credits, but with an otherness which may be more significant than we dare to imagine.

Each of the Gospels ends differently – which may itself be significant. Matthew ends with the Great Commission and the assurance: 'I am with you always, to the close of the age' (28:20); Luke makes the ascension the hinge of his two-volume work, a departure which yet heralds the coming of the Spirit; John finishes his account of Jesus' signs by saying that 'there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose the world itself could not contain the books that would be written' (21:25). The oldest of the Gospels is also the most enigmatic. Mark has three endings, two of which appear to be additions and conflation from the other synoptics. Yet what would appear to be the original ending is a puzzle. Jesus does not appear. A 'young man dressed in a white robe' speaks to the women, telling them that Jesus is risen, that they should go and tell the disciples 'he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him as he told you'. The women ran away, says Mark, 'for they were afraid' (16:8).

Why end here with Jesus' triumph in sight? One suggestion is that the resurrection was already well known – which would, if nothing else, explain why Mark notes that the women 'said nothing to any one'. Another explanation is that the original ending was lost; hence the secondary completions by later editors. Maybe, however, Mark did intend to end here. Perhaps he is making a theological point – by

setting a deliberately discordant note. Galilee, after all, is where the story begins, with the appearance of Jesus on the banks of the Jordan river. Mark's point is that the way to find the risen Lord is not by staying and waiting in one place but by living the gospel story again, by leaving and going back to the beginning. It is in the living of the story after the manner of Christ that the Christian comes to know him. This, of course, is one of the great themes repeated by John. Not only does Jesus point to the Father, signifying the way to the otherness of God, but the Christian too, guided by the Spirit, witnesses to that otherness which is revealed in the loving service of Jesus to his disciples.

In one way this is an old and familiar story. Abraham stands at the head of the covenantal tradition which responds in faith to the call of God. He does not stay in his familiar world but sets off for 'a place which he was to receive as an inheritance'. And so, as the author of Hebrews goes on, 'he went out not knowing where he was to go' (11:8). What is new in the gospel story is that the disciples are told not just to go forward, with eyes fixed on the eschatological kingdom – somewhere over the horizon, and therefore very much 'other' – but to keep coming back to the beginning, and to the renewal of God's original covenant with creation, an otherness which is yet very much present, significant here and now.

The extraordinary event of the resurrection of Christ is at once a rupture with the past and a new foundation for the future. When we tell that story, whether in the liturgy or through the countless lives which it has inspired over the centuries, remembering and celebrating their significance before God, we stand once again in a present moment from which we can begin to make sense of the baffling mystery of time. We know that the threads we hold are still tangled and fragile. But we also know that *we* are held. This is the new way of existing which is given to the Christian community: not a matter of transmitting an 'unchanging' content of faith, but of being true to the practice of transmission itself, the *way* in which the story is told. This is a story which allows for the otherness of God by reminding us of the idolatrous tendencies of all human desire; what we seek is 'not yet'. At the same time, it points to God's significance by inviting us to make way for each other through self-denying service, a particular practice of faith, hope and love. The gospel story is what the Church receives from Christ. As he makes way for '*another* Paraclete', the Spirit who will lead the Church into 'all the truth', so the Church learns by repeating this story of stories how to go on moving away from, yet also returning to, the paradoxical significant otherness of God – those traces and touches which are the promise of presence in the midst of absence.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Time and narrative*, translated by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, vol 1 (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1984), p 75.

<sup>2</sup> St Augustine, *Confessions*, translated by R. S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin, 1961), Book XI, 14.

<sup>3</sup> This evocative image comes from the employment of psychoanalytic concepts by the historian and philosopher Michel de Certeau. He uses it to explain how the relationship between past and present represents something more complex than 'mere' contemporaneity. See especially 'Psychoanalysis and its history' in his collection *Heterologies*, translated by Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), pp 3-16.