

Trevor Dennis retired in 2010 after over 16 years on the staff of Chester Cathedral as Canon Chancellor and then Vice Dean. Before that, he was tutor in Old Testament Studies and latterly Vice-Principal at Salisbury and Wells Theological (now Sarum) College, where he wrote his first books for SPCK. *God in our Midst* is his sixth collection of stories and poetic meditations, the first five having been *Speaking of God* (1992), *Imagining God* (1997), *The Three Faces of Christ* (1999, reissued in 2009), *Keeping God Company* (2002) and *God Treads Softly Here* (2004). SPCK has also published four books of his on Old Testament narratives, *Lo and Behold!* (1994, reissued in 2010), *Sarah Laughed* (1994, reissued in 2010), *Looking God in the Eye* (1998) and *Face to Face with God* (1999), and two volumes on narratives in the Gospels, *The Christmas Stories* (2007) and *The Easter Stories* (2008). His children's Bible, *The Book of Books*, was published by Lion Hudson in 2003, and has since been translated into Dutch, German, Welsh and Portuguese. In his retirement he has been speaking at conferences, delivering papers to theological societies or leading retreats in many parts of the UK. He is married to Caroline, and they have four children and three grandchildren.

GOD IN OUR MIDST

Gospel stories and reflections



Trevor Dennis

SPCK

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*For Christine,
erstwhile colleague
and dear friend*

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Introduction and acknowledgements

My eyes were first truly opened to the power of biblical storytelling when I discovered scholarly literary studies of Old Testament narratives. At the time I was teaching Old Testament at Salisbury and Wells Theological College. Some years later I came to the Gospels in what at Salisbury I had mischievously called the Appendix (which most Christians know as the New Testament). I had thought I had known them for years, having been brought up as a Christian and never having left the Church. But I discovered them afresh as four consummate works of art and the Evangelists as artists of creative genius (the Church had *four* of them within its first few decades!). Richard Burridge, in his book *What Are the Gospels?* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), establishes them as ancient biographies, designed not so much to give us all the details of Jesus' life, as to focus upon the question, 'Who was Jesus?' and to answer it by saying that he was and is our Lord and God. The Gospels claim to have a new tale to tell about God, a tale of a God who is born in a peasant family's house and never walks any corridors of power until he is arrested and marked for execution; a tale of a God who consistently puts the last first and the first last, and who overturns not just tables but the rest of the furniture as well; who talks of being a slave and goes beyond talk in kneeling to wash feet; above all, and most mysteriously of all, a God who finally comes out of hiding on a cross, and who then emerges from death still marked with the scars of crucifixion.

How then to release the power of this tale? Well, if the Evangelists were storytellers, masters of the word as well as of the Word, how about storytelling or poetry? It is not the only way, of course, but it is one that I have been following for some

years. Again and again I have found composing a story or poem on a biblical passage has allowed me to get deeper into the text than before and to gain a better understanding of what the writer is about. I have relished the room the Gospel stories leave for the imagination, and have taken full advantage of it.

I have always gone to the New Testament scholars first. They have made me notice the detail and its significance (every word counts in the Gospels), helped me to understand the culture that lies behind the material and so catch nuances in the text I would otherwise have missed, and given me new and important questions to explore. Some of them, such as the American writer John Dominic Crossan, I have found truly inspiring (those who know his work will catch echoes of it in the pieces in this book). But the Gospels, for all their originality and bright magnificence, are flawed works. The scholars have helped me appreciate that, too. Each of the Evangelists was trying to come to terms with Jesus of Nazareth, and while each succeeded to a remarkable degree, each of them had their failures – as all Christians have had since, and as we, of course, still do. Two examples will suffice.

First, the Gospels make it clear there were women among Jesus' disciples, and they give names to several of them. They suggest these women were witnesses to Jesus' death and burial, and the first to meet him as the risen, scarred God. All of them put Mary of Magdala in that company, and John in particular presents her as perhaps Jesus' most devoted disciple. If we ask who first told the stories of the crucifixion and resurrection, the Gospels would have us reply, Mary of Magdala and other women disciples. Further to that, and again most significantly, the Gospels suggest that Jesus went against the grain of his society by granting as much honour to women as to men. Yet where in the Gospels are the stories about these women? Neither Mark nor Matthew even mention the women disciples till they get to the cross. Luke devotes two verses to them in chapter 8 of his Gospel, but like the other Evangelists he has no stories

of their call. He does include an important story of Jesus with Martha and her sister Mary, and John elaborates further on their great friendship with Jesus: Mary gets to footwashing a chapter before Jesus does, while in the story of the raising of Lazarus, the two sisters occupy centre stage with Jesus, while their brother remains a shadowy figure even after his return to life. John it is who also tells the wonderful story of the meeting between Jesus and an unnamed Samaritan woman, and who gives us the finest example of all in the story of Mary of Magdala finding the risen Jesus. But this is not enough. The Church has hugely exaggerated the imbalance of the Gospels in its subsequent teaching and preaching, its liturgies and its art, but the Evangelists must shoulder some of the blame. In this collection I have tried to give the women of Bethlehem at the birth of Jesus their due, and Anna of Luke 2 also, and have paid careful heed to the role John gives Jesus' mother to play in the story of the wedding at Cana. Four stories in the Holy Week and Easter section I have devoted to women disciples. For two of them I have had to invent names.

The Gospels' casting so much blame onto Jesus' Jewish opponents, and their talking too casually of the responsibility of 'the Jews' for his death, was a mistake of even more catastrophic proportions, though, of course, we cannot lay at their door the hideous anti-Semitism that arose in subsequent generations. The Gospels keep their focus firmly on Jesus and the claims they make for him, and at no point do they make way for another point of view. In the Holy Week and Easter section I have included three pieces from 'the other side', and the second of those addresses the particular charges made in the Gospels against his Jewish detractors.

In its first three sections the book follows the pattern of the Christian year, which, of course, is itself closely based on the plots of the Gospels. Though only two of the Gospels pay any attention to Jesus' birth, all four agree on the significance of his death and resurrection and allow them generous space

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in their narratives. That is where, so they claim, the truth of it all comes out, and indeed we can say the Gospels demand to be read backwards, since everything that goes before is written in the light of those final events. I would hope it is appropriate, therefore, that the longest section of this book is the one devoted to the Passion, Crucifixion and Resurrection. The final two sections are devoted to pieces that draw their immediate inspiration from the Old Testament, or to pieces written for special occasions. They also were composed in the light of the Gospels, and many of them make explicit use of their material.

This is the sixth collection of my stories and poems that SPCK have published, and I am deeply grateful to their splendid team and most especially to Alison Barr, my editor, whose judgement I trust at every turn, and whose faith in me over the years has been humbling. I could not hope for anyone better to work with.

Almost all the pieces in the collection were composed while I was on the staff of Chester Cathedral. That was a place, like Salisbury and Wells, where I became notorious for my laugh (it is, I am told, unusually loud), which says a great deal about the community there and my former colleagues. They gave me the freedom to be myself and to continue with the habit I had developed at Salisbury of preaching and teaching exactly as I believe, and of mincing as few of my words as possible. When it comes to the Bible we must not pretend; we must tell it straight. The congregation and my fellow clergy at Chester Cathedral allowed me to do that, and I am most grateful to them for it.

I have a few others to thank: our daughter Jo and her husband John for encouraging me to include the piece I wrote for the baptism of their second son, Harry ('You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased'); Ann and Stewart for so readily allowing me to include 'Words dance in sacred space', the piece I composed for their wedding service; and my old

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friends Sally and Malcolm, Pooh and David for granting equally enthusiastic permission for me to put in the funeral address (if it can be called that) 'Remembering Tess'. Andrew Rudd, a Reader and published poet in the Chester Diocese, led a poetry workshop at one of the diocesan clergy conferences, and his enormous skill and encouragement led to my composing the little poem 'The geode'. I read out a first and very clumsy draft of the poem in the workshop, but Andrew had so enthused me, I worked on it again that evening before I went to sleep, and got up early the next morning to do some more.

My wife Caroline is not a Christian and, thank God, has never pretended to be one, but her support and encouragement of my writing have been unfailing. To her, of course, I owe the greatest debt and always will. But friends matter also, especially when they are like Christine Bull, whom I have known for some time now, and who was one of my colleagues at Chester in my final years at the Cathedral. Her preaching is outstanding, as is her faith, her wisdom and pastoral insight and care, and above all her sheer no-nonsense goodness and humanity. To her this book is dedicated with much gratitude and in the full knowledge that it is not nearly enough.

1

Advent, Christmas and Epiphany

Waiting for God

A piece for Advent Sunday. At one point I quote part of Isaiah 64.8: 'Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.' Eastgate Street, mentioned in line 5, is one of the main shopping streets in the centre of Chester.

An earlier version of this piece appeared in my book, The Christmas Stories (SPCK, 2007). The changes made here are very small.

Once more the wheel of the year has turned.
We are back at the beginning,
at this precious time of waiting.
Four weeks of it.

We have come out of the crush of Eastgate Street
and the queues at the tills,
to this place of waiting,
where we can sit and listen;
a place where the rush stops,
where the television is not switched on
with its nervous chatter of the world's disasters,
and its sorting through the pickings of our wickedness;
no e-mails can reach us here,
and if the mobile phone should ring,
then we will quickly turn it off,

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our faces redder than before.
We have turned aside to this patch of holy ground,
to sit and wait,
at this time precisely set aside,
like Lent,
for waiting.
Four weeks now of waiting.
Four weeks!
The insistent world in which we live
would have us want things now,
at the click of a button,
the blink of an eye.
But we have turned aside to wait
in God's good time.

So what are we waiting for?
For God to come and take us home,
to lead us up her garden path,
past trees of Wisdom and of Life,
to open wide the door,
cheer our spirits,
chase off the gloomy clouds of night,
to close the path to misery,
put on the kettle,
sit us down to tea and cake,
and make us laugh again.

As darkness falls we wish to sit with her
and hear her tales,
words that will not pass away.
We want our favourite story once again,
the one we think we know so well,
of journeys and a moving star,
of a birth without pain
and a child who never cries,
of shepherds smelling of angels,

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and the wisest of kings bending low with gifts in
outstretched hands
to a mother who is not tired at all,
and a man who does not mind the child is not his.
We want our make-believe.

God will tell it differently,
if only we will hear.

But that is not for now.
For now we wait, and waiting still, we wait.

Waiting for God is surely a strange occupation,
for God is all about us
in the wild skies,
in clouds unravelled by the wind,
the sun that turns the trees to gold and sea to
duck-egg blue,
in the gorse that flowers even in the frost,
the shades of winter bracken,
the lifted wings of swans,
the cries of whiffling geese,
in the kindness of strangers,
in acts of unexpected courtesy,
the fresh companionship of old friends,
the love of those whose wedding is near,
the delight of small children,
and the quiet courage of the old;
in the banter of hospital wards,
in all paying of attention and all showing of care,
all understanding and forgiving,
all making of peace,
all whistle-blowing where whistles should be blown,
all standing firm for truth and striving for what
is just,
all giving and acquiring of dignity,

Advent, Christmas and Epiphany

in all searching and finding of mystery,
and all humility.

We are surrounded by such a cloud of witnesses!
How can we wait for a God who has already arrived?

Because things are not all sweetness and light.

Need I spell it out?

Scratch every arm

and the blood of pain will come fast welling to the
skin.

We have other tales to tell, if we dare tell them,
even if we are not sitting in the ruins of

earthquake, flood, fire or riot,

even if we are not holding in exhausted arms our
precious child,

limp, pain-wracked, dying of hunger,

even if we are not high-walled and road-blocked
into Bethlehem,

to celebrate the coming of the Christ-child in an
empty church.

Sometimes it seems God is more than just four
weeks away.

And so we wait.

We all wait.

What icon shall we carry with us

for this pilgrimage of Advent

(for waiting is not sitting still,

but moving on to God's own destination)?

We are the clay, and you our potter;

We are all the work of your hand.

That will do. Just fine.

We will imagine you,

great God of this vast universe

so far beyond our grasp,

with your hands on the wheel,
holding us together,
keeping us whole,
stopping us flying off at a tangent
to land in pieces on the floor,
pressing us, moulding us,
smoothing us, bending us,
teasing us into shape,
then glazing us, firing us,
holding us up for the light to catch.
This golden image we will take on our journey,
for it brings you so near, O God
(for what could be closer than a potter to her clay?),
and we would dearly love to think of ourselves
as your fine handiwork,
and you dressed in an apron
washing dirty hands and fingernails!
Dressed like that, O God,
you will not seem out of place
when Mary's time has come
and the women gather round.

What tune are you singing, God?

Another Advent piece. The lines I have quoted below sometimes appear in the readings set for the Eucharist on the Third Sunday of Advent, just two weeks before Christmas Day.

*Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;
shout, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!*

*The LORD, your God, is in your midst,
a warrior who gives victory;
he will rejoice over you with gladness . . .*

years. Again and again I have found composing a story or poem on a biblical passage has allowed me to get deeper into the text than before and to gain a better understanding of what the writer is about. I have relished the room the Gospel stories leave for the imagination, and have taken full advantage of it.

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