

*The Thirty-eighth*

ERIC SYMES ABBOTT

Memorial Lecture

ON STORYTELLING  
AND TRUTH TELLING

delivered by

*Canon Paula Gooder*

Canon Chancellor, St Paul's Cathedral

*at Westminster Abbey*

on Thursday 23 May 2024

and

*at Keble College, Oxford*

on Friday 24 May 2024



**The Very Revd Eric Symes Abbott**  
(1906 – 1983)

*The Eric Symes Abbott Memorial Fund was endowed by friends of Eric Abbott to provide for an annual lecture or course of lectures on spirituality and pastoralia in his memory. The lecture is usually given in May in both London and Oxford; due to the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions, there was no lecture in 2020.*

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This Lecture is the thirty-eighth in the series, and details of previous lectures may be found overleaf. The text of most of these lectures can be downloaded for free from the website of the Dean's Office at King's College London (<https://www.kcl.ac.uk/dean/eric-symes-abbott-memorial-lecture-archive>); if you are unable to download the text, please contact the office to be sent a hard copy. Audio recordings of the lectures since 2014, and a video recording of the 2023 lecture, are also available on the same website.

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***ON STORYTELLING AND TRUTH TELLING***

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- 2017 XXXII. Salley Vickers, former Psychoanalyst, Literary Critic and Author: *“Faith & Imagination: How the Arts speak to the reality of the Unseen”*
- 2018 XXXIII. The Revd Richard Coles, Cleric, Broadcaster and former Communitarian: *“Beating the bounds: Parish Ministry and Spirituality Today”*
- 2019 XXXIV. Sir James Macmillan, Composer, Conductor, Artistic Director: *“The Most Spiritual of the Arts: Music, Modernity and the Search for the Sacred”*

NO LECTURE IN 2020

- 2021 XXXV. Loretta Minghella, Master of Clare College, Cambridge: *“Money,*

*Bias, and the Geography of the Heart*”

- 2022 XXXVI. Lord Adonis (Andrew Adonis): “*Peace Only Comes At Extreme Cost’: Europe Past, Present and Future*”
- 2023 XXXVII. Professor Anthony Reddie, Director of the Oxford Centre for Religion and Culture: “*From Black Theology to Black Lives Matter and Back Again*”

## ON STORYTELLING AND TRUTH TELLING

A few months ago, I was approached at the end of a talk by someone I knew a little but not very well. 'Young lady,' he said. I braced myself. Sentences which begin like that rarely end well, even if I am now of an age where appearing young to anyone, however grumpy, is somewhat exciting. 'When,' he asked, 'are you going to stop playing around with your little stories and get back to doing proper theology? I used to like reading your books when you were interested in facts.' To explain, three out of my last four books have consisted of stories. Two longer books exploring two key women from the New Testament, Phoebe and Lydia respectively, and a shorter collection of short stories focussed on the women who accompanied Jesus in the last week of his life. I opted not to tell him that my next book would be another collection of short stories for Advent and Christmas, and instead drew his attention to a commentary I published in 2020 on the parables of Jesus.

But his question intrigued me and I have reflected on it ever since. His was, obviously, an extreme view but he is not alone in assuming that non-fiction deals with facts and consequently with truth, and is the opposite of fiction which deals with make believe and imagination. On one side you have fact and reality, on the other stories and imagination. For those who make such a distinction, truth sits firmly with fact and reality, and not with stories and imagination. It is a notion that is widely accepted and which runs through many aspects of our lives. In short, the genre in which something is presented to us shapes how credible we consider it to be and, consequently, how seriously we think about it. A list of figures on a spreadsheet or a presentation of historic facts will automatically be assumed to be more truthful than, for example, a story.

I need to pause at this point to acknowledge that the subjects I am touching on here could very easily be addressed in a technical and abstruse manner. I could point to the philosophical exploration of epistemology or alethiology, the historiographical consideration of objectivity and subjectivity, not to mention many different aspects of Literary criticism, all of which have informed and shaped my own discipline of Biblical Hermeneutics. To the great relief of many, though

no doubt disappointment of some, I am not going to. Instead I want to keep my reflections at the more general level, and to explore what happens when we resist the binary approach of splitting fact and fiction from each other and allow that truth, in differing forms, can be found in both, though encountered differently. When we recognize the importance of avoiding an opposition between fact and fiction, it affects not only how we present material ourselves but how we receive what is presented to us, no matter the genre in which it is presented.

In January this year, a four-part drama was screened on ITV, which many of you will have seen, called *Mr. Bates vs the Post Office*.<sup>1</sup> The series, starring amongst others the brilliant Toby Jones, dramatized the British Post Office scandal in which over seven hundred sub-postmasters and -postmistresses were falsely accused and prosecuted for theft, false accounting and fraud due to the malfunctioning of the Horizon IT system. The series was well researched, well written and very well acted. What fascinated me was the response to it.

The first episode alerts us to some of the issues I have already set up above. The opening screen declared that it was a true story with some characters changed and some scenes imagined. In other words, it presented a true-ish story – true except for when it wasn't. What was interesting was its impact. The facts it presented had been, for the most part, in the public domain from long before the production of the drama series: the numbers of those prosecuted unjustly; the failures of the Horizon system; the reluctance of the executives from the Post Office to pursue an independent enquiry and so on; all of this was already known, available in countless newspaper articles and other reports. There was very little revealed in the drama that was new, but the genre conveyed the truth in a way that previous accounts had not. The telling of the story, the presentation of real lives in their contexts, meant that the 'truth' was accessible in a way that it hadn't been before.

This brings us to the first point about storytelling and truth-telling. Good storytelling can make truth more graspable. On one level, you could argue that *Mr. Bates vs the Post Office* was 'less true' than some of the detailed reports and articles that have been written about the scandal, after all, it had made-up scenes and characters in it, but many



who watched it apprehended the truth of what had happened far more powerfully than they had done before. In fact, many people engaged with the story for the first time as a result of the series. Consequently, public scrutiny of the inquiry into the scandal is now much more extensive, and has prompted the government to produce legislation on compensation for those affected. Furthermore, public interest in the subject has meant that more sub-postmasters and -postmistresses have come forward. More truth has been revealed as a result of the true-ish drama.

The role of storytelling in the comprehensibility of truth is crucially important. Part of the reason why the *Mr. Bates vs. the Post Office* series was so affective was because it told the stories of ordinary people with ordinary lives. People, like us, whose lives had been devastated by the events that took place. This human dimension is a vital factor in the comprehension of truth. The ability to reach across from our own experiences to those of others is something that helps us to understand issues more fully, and not only to understand them but to act on them.

There is a concept in philosophy and psychology known as conation, which is helpful here. Cognition refers to the process of coming to know something, looking at how we store, process and retrieve information, but conation connects knowledge to behaviour. Something that is conative affects the will and so drives us to act, to do something. I would argue that *Mr. Bates vs. the Post Office* was conative. It presented facts that so affected the national will, that something began to happen. Stories, like music, poetry, drama and other creative media, very importantly don't just present truth, they present it in such a way as we have to act on what we now know.

In a way connected to this, stories also provide context or background which enable us to understand issues more widely. My husband, Peter Babington, and I had a recent experience of this in our own family. Peter's great-grandfather, Richard Babington, was the Dean of Cork Cathedral in the Church of Ireland. A story is told often in the family of how, at the age of seven, Peter's grandfather, also called Richard Babington, was put on a boat by himself to go to school in Malvern. This was a story that horrified me in all sorts of ways, and I had many

opinions on the subject, most of them negative. Then in 2022 Peter and I went to Cork, I to speak at a conference and he to preach in St Finbarr's Cathedral, Cork, in the same pulpit his great-grandfather would have preached from before him. While we were there, we met a couple of people who still remembered Dean Babington and heard a few hair-raising tales about his love of boxing and how he used it in his pastoral ministry. What I came away with was a completely changed opinion on his decision to send his seven-year-old son to boarding school in England.

You see Richard Babington was Dean of the Anglican Cathedral in Cork from 1914 to 1952. A period that took in the First World War, the 1916 Easter Rising against British rule, the 1919-1921 Irish War of Independence and subsequent on-going conflicts, and the Second World War. He received endless threats to his life and had bombs put through his letter box, but he loved the place and the people, and so he stayed. When you know all of this, sending your seven-year-old son away seems like the most logical decision in the world. Here again the 'facts' of the story remained the same. Indeed, I knew a good number of them before going to Cork, but visiting the place, meeting the people, seeing the Cathedral and the house where he lived, wove the facts together into a story. When I saw this story against the backdrop of his life, of the place and of its history, I began to care. When I cared, I understood the facts differently. The wider background provided context, a sense of time and place which made what I thought I already knew more vibrant and relevant.

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It has never ceased to fascinate me that Jesus taught so often in parables. Depending on how you count, we have, recorded in the Gospels, around fifty-five parables of differing kinds. They range from long, complex allegorical type parables (like Parable of the Sower), to rich, though sparse, narrative worlds (like the Parable of the Prodigal Son), from snap-shot stories (like the Parable of the woman with the yeast) to brief, pithy comparisons (like the children in the marketplace who call to each other). The parables are so varied that it is often accepted by scholars that the only thing that can be said of all parables is that no one

statement is true of them all. You may remember that I mentioned earlier that I've written a book on the Parables of Jesus, and like many others before me, while I wrote it I fell into the trap of attempting to describe them all in a witty – or even dull – aphorism. My attempts over many weeks and months only served to prove to me that there is nothing that can be said about parables that is true of every parable. Things can be said that are true of many of them but little that is true of them all.

For many years, parables were interpreted through the lens of the parable of the Sower. The assumption was that because the first parable recorded in the gospels was presented as a simple allegory – with the Sower as Jesus himself, those listening to him as the path on which the seed is sown, the cares of the world, the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things as the thorns that choke the young plants – then all parables were simple allegories too. The challenge for the reader was to work out who stood for what in each parable – and most importantly which character stood for God or Jesus. Those who know Jesus' parables will be all too aware that this way frustration lies. Some parables work quite easily as parables, but the further you delve into the parables the harder it is. Until you get to the parable that defeats even the most determined of those who want to see the parables as allegories – the parable of the unjust steward in Luke 16.<sup>2</sup>

This parable tells the story of a steward or manager of a rich man. News came to the rich man that the steward was wasting all his possessions. Once the steward became aware that the rich man knew what he was doing, he started to discount the debts held by his master's creditors. He did this to such an extent that he won the approval of his master – though probably still lost his job – because he had made friends by means of dishonest wealth. The parable is confusing, hard to interpret or understand and for many people profoundly frustrating, because it is difficult to work out what we are meant to take away from it. There is no character that is clearly God, no obvious moral to learn, no clear point to be identified but, frustrating though it is, it is, weirdly, one of my favourite parables.

This is because it demands that we think more deeply. It forces us to return to it over and over again, noticing details we hadn't noticed

before, such as the vast quantities of the commodities traded: for example, the amount of olive oil owed would have come from over 150 trees, or the grain from 100 acres of land, meaning that the rich man's debtors were themselves also rich. It is also very difficult to decide where the weight of the meaning of the parable should lie. Should it be in the rich man's commending of the steward's shrewdness? Meaning that the parable recommends that those in the Kingdom of God should be likewise shrewd only with Kingdom values, not financial ones. Or maybe the weight lies with the statement in the parable that someone who is reliable with a little, will be reliable with a lot? Meaning that the steward was just the baddie of the story, unreliable with both a little and a lot, and it is reliability that is the heart of the parable. Yet again maybe it lies with the very end of the parable, which states that you can't serve God and money? Meaning that the problem in the parable is the wealth at play and not the rich man or the steward, and noting that money will always tempt you to act badly.

The point is that it is difficult, if not impossible, to tie the parable down. Every time you might think you've understood it, another theme pops up and challenges you to try again. The glory of Jesus' parables is that they allow for endless variety. They can be playful and thought-provoking. They can draw you onwards to new ideas and new ways of seeing the world. They are profoundly concrete, involving accounts of people doing something, and, in the case of the parables, this something is often mundane, like baking bread or sowing seeds, except for a few occasions involving massive banquets or building towers. But they are also allusive, leaving ends untied and meanings unclear. In the parables, as indeed in many stories, truth is to be found but it is not presented gift-wrapped in a straightforward form. Parables demand that we strive to encounter truth: some less so, others more so but all of them to some extent or another.

Working with the parables often reminds me of Emily Dickinson's untitled poem, slightly tweaked for a modern audience:

Tell all the truth but tell it slant —  
Success in Circuit lies  
Too bright for our infirm Delight

The Truth's superb surprise  
As Lightning to the Children eased  
With explanation kind  
The Truth must dazzle gradually  
Or everyone be blind —

In other words, the way in which parables deliver their truth is indirectly, around the side rather than straight down the middle. This is a concept that is recognised in areas far beyond parable study. In a 2011 book on economics, John Kay used the term 'Obliquity', a term suggested to him by the Nobel Prizewinning Chemist, Sir James Black,<sup>3</sup> which he defined in an article about the concept like this:

If you want to go in one direction, the best route may involve going in the other. Paradoxical as it sounds, goals are more likely to be achieved when pursued indirectly. So the most profitable companies are not the most profit-oriented, and the happiest people are not those who make happiness their main aim. The name of this idea? Obliquity ... Oblique approaches are most effective in difficult terrain, or when outcomes depend on interactions with other people'<sup>4</sup>

In my view the parables are the ultimate narrative example of obliquity. Many, though as I've already established not all of them, are about the Kingdom of God. A lot of them begin, 'The Kingdom of God is like...' or 'The Kingdom of Heaven is like...', and they then proceed to talk about a woman who bakes bread or a farmer who sows seeds or a landowner who travels far away. Jesus never offers a definition of the Kingdom, he tells the truth of the Kingdom but he tells it slant, he offers it obliquely and leaves the readers to arrive at the truth for themselves.

What I have been arguing thus far is that stories, dramas, narratives, parables and other forms of fiction play an important role in the apprehension of truth. If we place them over against fact, something is lost. Stories do not replace facts, statistics, statements or any other form of presenting the reality of what happened or what is, but stories are a vital, supporting instrument in the toolkit of the presentation of truth. They can be conative, affecting the will to act; they can reflect a wider context or background, helping to make sense of what really happened;

they can present facts obliquely, telling them slant as Emily Dickinson would have said. These are only three possible ways in which stories can contribute to the task of truth-telling, there are many others too, but once we accept that stories do have a place in the toolkit of truth-telling then we need to take time to reflect on them, how we construct them and how we receive them.

The task of storytelling has at its heart the skill of sifting and ordering what we want to communicate, so that we can lay it out in way that draws the reader in and sets their imagination on fire. Susan Sontag, the American writer and critic who died in 2004, wrote widely on the skill of storytelling. She said of fiction writing that:

[e]very writer of fiction wants to tell many stories, but we know that we can't tell all the stories – certainly not simultaneously. We know we must pick one story, well, one central story; we have to be selective ... A novelist ... is someone who takes you on a journey ... makes something go where it was not.<sup>5</sup>

For me, one of the lessons to be learnt from the art of storytelling which affects almost everything that we do, is the attention we need to pay to the selection and ordering of what we communicate.

We are accustomed to witnesses in legal trials being asked to swear that they will tell 'the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth'. The problem, as is widely acknowledged, is that this is impossible to do. We cannot describe everything that we see at any one time. If we tried, we would be quickly overwhelmed with unnecessary information. For example, if I attempted to capture, in detail, even just the clothing of the people I can see in front of me now, we would very quickly end up with far more information than could ever be comprehended or remembered. So we don't tell the whole truth, we don't even remember the whole truth. We sift it. We remember the most important details, or at least the ones that seem important to us. This is one of the great challenges of witness statements, that people simply cannot see, remember and recall everything that happens. Our brains filter it, giving us the edited highlights of what has happened.

Oliver Sacks, the neurologist known to many for his book *The Man who*

*Mistook his Wife for a Hat*, talks in many of his works about memory. In a 2013 essay published in the New York Review of Books, Sacks noted that

[t]here is no way by which the events of the world can be directly transmitted or recorded in our brains; they are experienced and constructed in a highly subjective way, which is different in every individual to begin with, and differently reinterpreted or reexperienced whenever they are recollected. Our only truth is narrative truth, the stories we tell each other and ourselves.’<sup>6</sup>

In other words, according to Sacks, we are all storytellers in the way that we store and recount what has happened to us in our lives. You may balk at his statement that the only truth is narrative truth, but it is certainly something worth reflecting on.

As a New Testament scholar these kinds of observations remind me powerfully of discussions about the gospels, and particularly how historical they are. The stories they choose and the order in which they present them has, over the years, prompted extensive debate about historicity and accuracy. As I read Susan Sontag on storytelling or Oliver Sacks on memory, I can imagine the different gospel writers, nodding along saying that they already knew that.

If we bypass the extensive conversations, necessary to those of us are trained in New Testament scholarship, about who wrote each gospel, and call the authors Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, I can hear John telling us that of course he had to select the stories he wrote down about Jesus, and not only that but he told us that he did when he said ‘Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book’, that is, the Gospel of John. This is one of those facts that we all know, but we so often forget that we know. It is inconceivable that the gospels, that we now have, contain a full account of everything that Jesus said and did, unless you conceive of Jesus’ ministry consisting of sporadic activity with extensive periods of inactivity in between. In telling us the story of Jesus’ life, the earliest Christians and subsequently the gospel writers have exercised extensive

selectivity, presenting us with only a tiny fraction of the things that Jesus said and did.

One of the questions to which we can never know the answer, but which is fun to ask nevertheless, is whether the large number of parables that we have in the gospels accurately reflects the proportion of parables to other teaching that Jesus uttered, or whether they were simply more memorable and therefore kept in greater number than his other teachings. Whatever the answer to this question, it is clear that the gospels we now have were curated by the earliest Christians, with stories included and others omitted, in order to communicate the truth most effectively. John himself tells us that he wrote down the accounts he did, ‘so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.’<sup>7</sup>

Luke similarly stated at the very start of the Gospel of Luke that he had written an orderly account in Luke’s Gospel so that the most excellent Theophilus – whoever he was, real or imagined – might know the truth concerning those things about which he had been instructed.<sup>8</sup> In the opening verses of the gospel, Luke made very clear that he believed it was the careful investigation and orderly nature of his writing that would make all the difference to Theophilus knowing the truth. The word translated ‘orderly’ is particularly important. The word refers to sequence but it is clear from the use of the word, both here and elsewhere in Luke–Acts, that this doesn’t mean chronological sequence. Writing his account of Jesus’ life ‘in order’ is more about theological order than about ‘this happened first and that happened next.’

When you start paying attention to Luke’s ordering, you realise quite how skilled he was at the task. Just a little example to provide with the flavour of this: in Luke 10, Jesus told what was arguably one of his most famous parables, the parable of the Good Samaritan, where the whole parable is predicated on the reader being suspicious of Samaritans; without this knowledge the whole dynamic of the parable gets lost.<sup>9</sup> It is widely assumed that Luke’s audience are not Jewish, so they may not have known this. It is therefore intriguing to note that about a chapter before, halfway through chapter 9, Jesus and his disciples passed through a Samaritan village, who did not receive Jesus. So incensed



were the disciples by this that they offered to call for fire to rain down on them. It seems an inconsequential account until a chapter later, you encounter the only other mention of Samaritans in Luke's Gospel. He was readying his audience to understand that Samaritans were unsavoury outsiders. With consummate skill, Luke did what all storywriters should do – show not tell.

Luke's ordering was careful and clever, and it also had a clear purpose. In the first four verses of the gospel, Luke signals that his primary motivation in the investigation, selection and writing of his account was persuasion.<sup>10</sup> In other words, Luke carefully ordered his account in order to sway Theophilus. This is a phenomenon well known in histories from the Ancient world; like many other historians of the period, Luke's intention in writing was to influence, and he selected and ordered his account in order to achieve this.

In some ways this feels as though it runs counter to what we believe about historicity and truth. Surely truth is the simple recounting of facts as they happened, in the order in which they took place? Surely anything that selects the facts or re-orders them is less true than a simple rehearsal of things exactly as they happened? It is clear that the gospel writers didn't think so. For them, the selection and ordering of what happened drew their readers closer to the truth rather than driving them further away. For them, truth consisted of more than just recording and repeating what happened; truth was to be found in understanding who Jesus really was and believing in him. As we reflect on the importance of stories for truth-telling, this observation seems crucially important for anyone attempting to speak truthfully in the modern world.

I mentioned above the oath sworn by witnesses in a court of law to tell 'the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.' This raises the question of what counts as 'the whole truth.' If we accept that it is impossible to describe everything exactly as it happened in minute detail, and if we accept that sometimes it is necessary to curate the narration of events in order to depict something that is more true, then we are left a challenge of discerning in the many different situations in which we find ourselves what it is that brings us closest to the whole truth.

Of course, context and genre is all: giving witness testimony to a jury requires a different discipline to that of writing a Gospel or indeed a novel. Most of us, most of the time find ourselves somewhere between witness testimony and fiction writing, and that challenges us to think deeply and honestly about how we approach telling the ‘whole truth’. In 1986 Sir Robert Armstrong coined a phrase that has now made its way into common usage. He argued in the so-called ‘Spycatcher’ trial that a book by a former MI5 employee contained ‘a misleading impression, not a lie. It was,’ he said, ‘being economical with the truth.’<sup>11</sup> I find that phrase is haunting because we are all, in certain ways, economical with the truth. The key seems to be intentionality – you can select and curate information with the intention of subverting the truth, or you can do it with the intention of drawing closer to the whole truth.

It is this theme of intentionality that becomes very important in the realm of storytelling and truth-telling. The reason why it is so important that we accept the role of stories for truth telling is because all of us tell stories, all of the time. Most of them are not of the quality of a fine novelist’s work, but the minute we speak about ourselves, about our work, the places we live or the things we care about, we are crafting a story. Most of the time we include or exclude details without thinking about it, but the craft of storytelling demands that we pay attention to what we select and how we present it. It demands that we ask ourselves what we are trying to say and why we want to say it. It also demands that we pay attention to the stories others tell us. As I hope I have demonstrated thus far, genre does not guarantee truth. Lists of facts and spreadsheets are no more purveyors of truth than any other genre. Inconvenient though it be, if we want to discover whether something happened or not, or reflects the truth or not, we have to check, and that checking is laborious and often frustrating. In our post-truth world, discovering what really happened can be challenging indeed.

This is one of the reasons why, in my opinion, it is so important to take stories seriously. If we pay proper attention to stories, then we train ourselves in the craft of interrogating the stories we hear, whether they are told to us by politicians, the media, social media, advertisers, statisticians, scientists or even novelists. With practice we can learn the

skill of identifying authenticity, credibility and reliability. We won't get it right all of the time but the more practised we are at paying attention to the stories that swirl around us every moment of every day, the more skilled we will be at recognising where truth lies.

This recognition of truth is an art, not a science, and is what contributes to the glorious complexity of living. Not least because the power of stories lies in, as Susan Sontag observed, making 'something go where it was not.' The truth of stories does not exist solely in the realm of what is; they also draw us to what could be or what might be. At the heart of the Christian faith lies the belief that this world is not all that there is, that beyond the harsh realities, the heartache and the misery, is a God of love who breathed life into the world at the dawn of time and continues to nurture hope and new life when we are tempted to believe that all is lost. Sometimes telling it exactly as it seems to us is not the most truthful thing that we can do. Sometimes we need to tell it as it might be, as it could be and as we yearn for it to be. And one of the best ways to do that is in stories.

I want to end my reflections with Eric Symes Abbott, in whose memory these lectures were founded. I was never fortunate enough to meet him and so have no direct connection to him. All I have are the stories told about him. Eric James, who wrote a 'portrait' of him in his book *The House of my Friends* observes that shortly before his death, Abbott destroyed all his sermons and other writings. Nearly all that remains are the myriad letters and postcards he wrote during his lifetime and the stories people told of him. The stories provide a sense of man who was deeply serious but also humorous, wise, learned and full of compassion.

As a teacher of New Testament Greek in the past myself, I was particularly taken with Eric James' description of his first Greek lesson with Eric Abbott. He said:

The very first evening, when he made us copy out the Greek alphabet and went round to see what each of us had written, he paused when he came to me, bent down to look over my shoulder and, with a smile when he saw that I had given a dot to an iota, whispered quietly, 'Dot not!' and as he said the words, to give

each of them emphasis and in mock rebuke, he touched me gently on the head twice, with the tip of his mortar board.<sup>12</sup>

And in that story I gain a real sense of him, a sense that I suspect I would not have encountered had I read all of his sermons and other writings. It is stories like this that communicate something about who he was and, it is for reasons like this that I maintain passionate about the importance of stories, alongside commentaries and monographs, spreadsheets and artifacts, facts, statistics, statements and the like, for opening a window on what is true. Stories alone cannot capture and communicate truth, but without them something is most definitely lost.

We live in a world that is drowning in so many facts and counter-facts that it can, sometimes, feel impossible to discern any truth at all. We live in a world that stands on the brink of multiple crises, any one of which could plunge us into chaos and turmoil. We live in a world paralysed by fear and heartbreak. If ever we needed stories, we need them now. Stories that warm our hearts and challenge us to act; stories that tickle our imaginations and help us understand; stories that tell the truth so slant that it navigates under and around our carefully built defences. In the complex, bewildering world that we inhabit, we need to practice over and over again the discipline of telling as much of the ‘whole truth’ as we can, and of discerning that ‘whole truth’ in the stories we receive from others. In this world, we are in desperate need of artists of all kinds: musicians, poets, dancers, sculptors, painters and, of course, all who are weavers and tellers of stories. It is in the art that they produce that we can not only see the world truly as it is, but also as it might be ... in all its glory.

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<sup>1</sup> Hughes, Gwyneth (Writer), *Mr Bates vs The Post Office*, Directed by James Strong, featuring Toby Jones, Monica Dolan et. al. aired 01/01/2024 on ITV

<sup>2</sup> Luke 16.1-12

<sup>3</sup> Kay, John. *Obliquity: Why Our Goals Are Best Achieved Indirectly*. Profile Books, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.johnkay.com/2004/01/17/obliquity/> accessed 16/05/2024

<sup>5</sup> Sontag, Susan. *At the Same Time*. Penguin UK, 2013, p. 23.

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<sup>6</sup> Sacks, Oliver. "Speak, Memory." *The New York Review of Books*, February 21, 2013. <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2013/02/21/speak-memory/>.

<sup>7</sup> John 20.30.

<sup>8</sup> Luke 1.3.

<sup>9</sup> Luke 10.25-37

<sup>10</sup> Green, Joel B. *The Gospel of Luke*. (W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1997), pp. 43-45.

<sup>11</sup> 'Robert Armstrong' in Knowles, Elizabeth, ed. *Oxford Dictionary of Modern Quotations*. OUP Oxford, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> James, Eric. *The House of My Friends: Memories and Reflections*. A&C Black, 2005, p.37.