

STORIES THAT TELL THE GOSPEL

Study 1

Trevor Faggotter

MORE THAN STORIES

Australian SBS television has a catchy framework for advertising, their programming, cleverly entitled *Six Billion Stories ... and counting*—SBS. Many people like to tell you ‘a yarn’. This series, however, is about *Stories That Tell The Gospel*. Undoubtedly the Bible itself does that best of all. However, other stories can be told in such a way, as to provide a clear testimony to God’s grace, known in Jesus Christ.

GOD HAS SPOKEN

“Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the world” (Hebrews 1:1-2). Scripture shows us the various ways God has spoken, revealed or communicated his Word—the wonders of his love, mercy and presence—over the centuries, including:

- *Creation* (Psalm 19:1-4),
- *Theophanies*¹ or manifestations of Himself (Genesis 18:1f.; Exodus 3:2f.)
- *Angelic visitants* (Gen. 28:10-17),
- *The law* (Psalm 119; cf. Deut. 33: 1ff.),
- *His own acts* throughout history,
- *The prophets* (Numbers 12:6; Deut. 18:15ff.; Jer. 23:23f.),
- *Jesus Christ* the Logos, (John 1:1-3)
- *The Spirit* (II Pet. 1:20-21; John 16:12-15) and
- *The church*-the proclaimers of truth.

“LET ANYONE WITH EARS LISTEN!”

Jesus told stories and parables, with the *onus* being placed upon those who heard him, to engage earnestly with what he was saying (see Matthew 13). He said: “Then pay attention to how you listen; for to those who have, more will be given; and from those who do not have, even what they seem to have will be taken away”. (Luke 8:18) To listen, and to hear and to respond with faith to God’s Word is most significant for how our lives work out—it is a matter of life and death. To miss what God is saying, through pride, laziness, guilt or unwillingness, results in personal loss. Life has a purpose and so do stories. We are to live by God’s Word—God speaking to us.

¹ G.C. Bingham, *The Everlasting Presence*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1989, p. 181

"...God never appeared to a person without the purpose of getting that one to do something. Theophanies were not just for pleasure or memorable recall, but for action! God is the living God, the God who acts. Abel was to prophesy, as Enoch also. Noah was to build an ark and be a preacher of righteousness. Abraham was to be the covenant-patriarch. Moses was to lead the people. Others were to say this and that, and do this and that"

TOM AND THE MAGPIES²

It's a short story, thank goodness, because I can't write anything that is long; but it is so funny and so true that I feel the need to tell it—this story about Tom and the magpies.

We used to live in an Adelaide suburb, and found it quite good, especially when the children were young. About the only strange happening I can recall was our young Mary who went to see the Doctor Doolittle films, and came home convinced she could talk to cats and dogs and that they would understand her and even talk back. What brings the incident back to me was that she was convinced the magpies knew what she was talking about.

In a way you could understand that. We had two magpies on our block—George and Mildred—and they owned the territorial rights of our land, 56 Angus Street, Knightsbridge. We couldn't do much about it, because they came with the place when we bought it. We soon learned to be obedient to them and feed them with what scraps Pongo our lazy Labrador wasn't given. I mean, we kept back part of the scraps for George and Mildred. At least twice in a year they had progeny from their nest in the high blue-gum that was at the end of our block, and we were expected to help feed them also. All of this went with the territory.

Tom worked out at Gepps Cross in the abattoirs, and his work was shift work, so often he didn't see George and Mildred, as he would be gone before they came with their breakfast demands. Most of their warbling—or do you call it chortling?—they used to do from the top of the blue-gum, and Tom rarely heard them. Of course, on moonlight nights they were a bit of a nuisance.

I noticed during our Mary's Doolittle phase that Tom was quite interested in her conversations with Pongo, Cerise our tabby cat, and George and Mildred. Tom has always been a thoughtful but mostly silent man, so he never really commented on Mary's communications with the animals. Mary grew out of that phase, and with her sister Angeline and her brother Andrew grew into another phase, namely that of selecting a partner for life. The three of them did this very well, and we were caught up into their weddings—all three in the one year.

When that was over Tom said he thought we ought to get a quieter place for ourselves. He wasn't one for all this 'greenie' and 'conservationist' thing, but he had always wanted to live in the country. He said he could travel each day to Gepps Cross, so we bought a place a bit north of the abattoirs, and where the country was very green. In fact we had ten acres now to ourselves, and one of those old greystone houses which had once been the farmhouse.

We reckoned we were very lucky to get it—it being so cheap, and all that—but then Tom had to do some repairs, and this rather filled up his weekends; but he didn't mind that. In no time we had a good place going—fish ponds, an aviary of finches, some lawns, and even a corner which looked like part of a rain forest. It is remarkable what you can do if you follow the telly garden-and-home sessions. I knew Tom felt pretty proud of it all.

I am now coming to the interesting part—the part about the magpies. We knew something regarding them because of George and Mildred, but there was a difference between their species and the new species we met on our mini-farm. The territorial things was there all right, but in our former home George and Mildred, after they had trained their offspring to maturity, would chase them off the block. The younger birds had to find a new area for themselves, and they must have done that for they never

² G. C. Bingham, *The Boy in the Valley*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1992, p. 243—247

returned for birthday celebrations or that kind of thing. Nor did they bring their offspring back to be looked at, as ours did.

No: our new maggies were altogether different. They worked on what you call the clan-and-saga basis. There must have been a few generations of them, and they all lived on the farm. Primarily it was their farm and we were allowed to stay there and provide food. Luckily there was a Deli near us that used to pass on the bread that was stale, and out-of-date cake. So in that sense we were not eaten out of house and home.

Tom would go off to work early so I did the feeding. I learned quite a lot about maggies, namely that they have a pecking order. That idea was not new, but it helped me to reckon what were the first, second and third generations. The first generation had their fill, then the second, and finally, the third. They were the closest thing to conformists I had ever met, but occasionally there would be a rebel, and he—or she—would swoop in for a chance morsel. It was a bit of a laugh really, because not one of them ever made it. Immediately the older black and whites would swoop on the swooper and give him—or her—what for. They would peck, thrash him with their beaks, sometimes turn him over and ignore his terrified squawking until he learned his—or her—lesson. The magpies certainly did it better than we had done it.

Pongo had gone off with Mary, Cerise with Angeline, and Andrew had bought a Rottweiler. We kept strictly to our Japanese fantail fish and our semi-silent finches. So for the most part our little farm was a haven of rest, and that was the way Tom liked it. He had come out into the rural area for clean, fresh air, and quietness.

That is, until his shift changed to night-work. He worked and would arrive back by four in the morning. Just enough time to have a shower, a cup of tea and go off to sleep. The sun would wake him when it was reasonably high in its blue arch. At least that was the idea. How it actually worked out was different.

The maggies had a set hour for breakfast—they set the time. At five o'clock they would commence their warbling. I have never quite understood warbling. Do maggies warble because they are happy, because they are singing territorial songs to other maggies, or do they just sing for the heck of it? It once struck my suspicious mind that they did it to wake us up so we could all get on with breakfast. Whatever their reason for their dawn-time liquid gargling, it aroused rage in my Tom.

In the beginning he thought it was a bit funny, and accepted the fact that just as he was getting to sleep they were getting to wake up. You have to admit that there is something sweet about magpie warbling—no matter what the species. This must be the case or not so many people would record them, and play the songs over and again on the radio. You probably know that they are also on CD. Of course, with CD you can turn on the music just when you like, and—better still—can turn it off when you wish.

After a few sleepless early mornings I saw my Tom was getting up a bit of rage. It was not a case of 'maintaining the rage'. It just became more and more, until one morning he told them to shut up. There was a moment's silence and no more. A few cocked their heads on one side at the noise, then their looks lightened again and the warbling began afresh. I think Tom came to believe they did not warble but that they chortled, and he could have been right. He thought they chortled because he had to stay awake, watch me distributing the bits of food, and had to hear all the bird goings-on with the occasional rebel rabble, and have to take in all the family squawking, squabbling and general bird gossip.

He wondered what he could do. Should he buy a gun, even when people were arguing about gun laws? Should he borrow Andrew's newly imported Chinese self-loading weapon, or he should he go back to the old catapult which he used as a boy, and sling the whole three generations into oblivion. Even in his rage he knew he

would never be successful.

To this day I don't know what it was that ended the early morning maggie cacophony. I know it was what Tom did, but then I really don't know what he did. I know he could stand it no more, that he stamped around the room in white-hot anger and used language that would send any self-respecting bird away in shock, but our maggies were a tough breed. They had to be, to survive generations of humans.

All I can do is to describe what I saw—and heard.

In the midst of their warbling, chortling and liquid throat-gargling, Tom stuck his head out of our bedroom window. I mean, he stuck it right out. All of his pyjamæd torso was thrust forward, and Tom began a warbling speech. At first they must have thought he was them, and they were themselves. So they kept warbling.

Then a strange thing happened. One by one they ceased their vocal operations. One warble after another ceased. Bird-language faded away. It all died to one last gargling whimper, and the black and white creatures sat in their various places—on branches,

fences, rocks and the fish-pool stones—and they listened. I don't know what Tom had picked up from Mary or Doctor Doolittle, or just what primeval memory and ancient utterance broke through, but it was fascinating to see them become a captive audience and listen. Heads were on the side, eyes were peering and staring. Here and there a bid almost fell off its sitting point, but all listened.

Tom let them have the lot. I don't even know what 'the lot' was, but it was evident that he was an excellent communicator. Fantastic in fact. For myself, I almost froze with fear and fascination. I felt his warbling go through me like a diesel engine through a tunnel. It was uncanny.

It was good. I won't swear to it that the birds eventually bowed to him—dipped their heads and beaks, so to speak—but I watched them fly away as though a great wonder had happened. We saw little of them after that. Almost all of them had gone to find new territory. A few still hung around the perimeter of the ten acres, but their heart was not in it. It was a sort of burnt-out magpie belt: that is the only way I can describe it.

Weeks later a few brave ones flew in for the usual a.m. time, and a tentative warble or two began. When Tom threw up the window and extended his torso towards them and began his Doolittle—or Doolot—stuff, they literally fled.

All kinds of birds visit us now, but maybe that is because all the native shrubs we planted have begun their good work—honey flowers, more insects, and all that. I do not know. All I know is I have a different Tom. I don't much like the mysterious smirk on his face, and the secret pride I sometimes see peeping out of his eyes, but maybe it is the extra sleep he gets which fosters that.

I don't know. I can only tell you the story as it happened—as I saw and heard it. I'm afraid you'll have to work the rest out for yourself.

Some Theological Reflection and Analysis of the Story:

1. God has spoken, and speaks to us in our language. Human beings are made in God's image and likeness of God, with amazing gifts of communication.
2. Jesus said: 'Look at the birds' (Matthew 6:26) to learn about trusting God. All of life matters. Creation speaks to us. Communication matters. Sleep matters. Small problems matter. Merciful solutions matter. Listen to what God is saying to you, in the mystery of life.

The Recommended Book, and Story for this week to read: *The Media Centre* by Geoffrey Bingham, in *The Return of the Lorikeets*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1995.