Narrative Christology in the gospels: reflections on some recent developments and their significance for theology and preaching

Rev Dr Stephen Hultgren

Stephen Hultgren is lecturer in New Testament at Australian Lutheran College and Director of the newly established Australian Lutheran Institute for Theology and Ethics (ALITE). His research interests include the gospels, Pauline theology, and ancient Judaism, particularly the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Narrative has always been important in biblical faith. One does not need to look far to see this. The canon of Holy Scripture as a whole comprises one long story from the beginnings of the created universe to the consummation of all things in the new creation. Also in Scripture’s parts narrative is important. The Pentateuch incorporates various materials within an overarching narrative framework. Old Testament summaries testify to the importance of Israel’s (hi)story for the people’s identity (eg, Deut 26:5–10). Some of the psalms narrate Israel’s history in the context of praising God or appealing to God for help. The gospels proclaim the good news of salvation through Jesus in story form. Though less obviously, the highly conceptual Paul locates the ‘Christ event’ within a history of salvation constituted by the biblical narrative. In that Scripture is held together by a schema of promise and fulfilment, an overarching narrative can hardly be avoided.

Even the church’s creeds can be viewed as narrating one long story of creation, redemption, and consummation. In defending the regula fidei, Irenaeus famously rebuked the Gnostics for putting the various elements of the biblical story out of their proper order and relationship to each other (Against the Heresies 1.8.1; 1.9.4). ‘Getting the story right’ was crucial for rendering a correct (orthodox) understanding of the apostolic faith.

The concern of this article is to reflect on some recent developments in narrative Christology in the gospels and on their significance for theology and preaching. We first trace the loss and recovery of narrative sense in the study of the gospels. We pay attention to each of three crucial stages, moving backwards in time: the final form of the written gospels; the gospel tradition; and the ministry of the ‘historical Jesus’. We conclude with some reflections on the significance of narrative Christology for theology and preaching.
The loss and recovery of a narrative sense of the gospels

The canonical gospels

In a study of 18th and 19th century hermeneutics, Hans W Frei traced the ‘eclipse of biblical narrative’ in continental, particularly German, and British biblical scholarship (1974). He noted that before the rise of historical criticism, it was largely taken for granted that the biblical story, from beginning to end, could be and should be read as a unified and realistic narrative. With respect to the gospels specifically, in the 18th and 19th centuries the integrity of the gospel narratives suffered as critical scholarship tended to interpret them in different directions: either the gospel narratives must be accurate representations of history; or, if not that, the sense of the narrative must lie in (biblical or extra-biblical) concepts that they teach; or the sense of the narratives lies in a consciousness (mythical or authorial) from which the narratives allegedly arose. In all this, so Frei argued, the sense of the gospel narratives as realistic narratives (not necessarily identical with historical report)—that is, the sense that narrative shape and textual meaning are integrally related—was lost. Although Frei traced this history only into the 19th century, he pointed out that the situation had not changed much in the 20th century.

Frei’s book was timely, for just when it was published gospel scholarship was undergoing a sea change, as scholars were turning from the ‘classical’ methods of source, form and redaction criticism to narrative criticism; that is, roughly speaking, from an analytical approach to a more holistic approach that seeks to appreciate how the narrative as a whole functions as a narrative, with less attention to the historical circumstances out of which the text arose or the intentions of its author. In the history of ideas this was also the period of the so-called ‘narrative turn’, when narratology was becoming increasingly prominent in literary studies and when scholars across a wide range of disciplines were turning to narrative as a key category for other kinds of analysis (social, psychological, etc). Narrative became increasingly important for understanding memory (eg, Bruner) and personal and communal identity (eg, Ricoeur 1988: 246–47; 1992: 113–68).

Narrative criticism has been applied to the biblical writings with varying degrees of success. With respect to the gospels, narrative criticism has done the important work of showing that the gospel writers were more than collectors of traditions and editors of sources; they were storytellers, with overarching narrative interests. For these interests form and redaction criticism mostly could not give account, focused as they were on individual units of tradition and the evangelists’ redactional work. To take just one example, we have come to appreciate in the last few decades, in a way that readers did not do before, the narrative accomplishments of the gospel of Mark, for so long the neglected step-child among the gospels. In its ironic depiction of the disciples; in its picture of Peter both as a tragic failure and as a symbol of the hope of redemption; in its careful plotting of the coming of the kingdom of God through conflict, death, and resurrection—in these and other ways the gospel of Mark proves itself to be a masterful
narrative, and it is in this dimension that much of its theological depth lies. Narrative criticism does, of course, have limitations; a narrative criticism that excludes historical questions has difficulty handling elements of texts that are better explained by the contours of the underlying tradition.

Our interest here is specifically narrative Christology in the gospels, that is, the way in which Jesus' identity is intimately bound up with the narrative about him. A conventional approach to New Testament Christology has been to study the titles. First one asks how the titles (Messiah/Christ, Lord, Son of God, Son of Man, etc) would have been understood in the first century; then one studies how a particular evangelist uses the titles and asks whether and to what extent his usage fits first-century usage. While there is much to be learned from this approach, it assumes that titles have a kind of static content. That is, the title, abstracted from the texts in which it is used, has a fixed meaning, to which Jesus does or does not correspond. But scholars of the gospels have become increasingly aware that a more dynamic approach is needed. It is precisely in the unfolding of the narrative that the titles, as expressions of Jesus' identity, find much of their meaning.

Consider two examples. In a recent book on narrative Christology in Luke, C Kavin Rowe focuses on the use of the title/term kyrios in the Gospel of Luke (Rowe 2009). Luke stands out for his frequent use of the title/term kyrios (vocative: kyrie) for Jesus during his earthly ministry. Noting the ambiguity with which Luke uses the word with reference to Jesus—it is not always clear whether Luke intends the word to be understood as a term of polite address ('Sir') or as a divine title ('Lord')—Rowe argues that the ambiguity is deliberate. Was (is) Jesus a human ('Sir') or God ('Lord')? The answer, of course, is both. Is Jesus distinguishable from the Lord, the God of Israel, or does he share identity with him? The answer, again, is both. This usage of kyrios not only for the risen Lord but also for the pre-Easter Jesus enables Luke to express continuity within change in Jesus' identity; it is the narrative itself that is essential to constituting his identity. Jesus takes on rejection and suffering and absorbs a violent death as an essential part of his identity as Lord. Who Jesus is as kyrios cannot be understood apart from the specific narrative that is told about him.

Another example is my own. In Matthew 11:2–6 John the Baptist, having heard of Jesus' 'works', sends by way of his disciples to ask Jesus whether he is the 'coming one' (ho erchomenos), or 'are we to wait for another?' Jesus responds by telling them to report to John what they hear and see: the blind recover their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor receive the good news. And blessed is everyone who does not take offence at Jesus.

1 For an interesting presentation of the gospel of Mark along these lines, see Rhoads, Dewey, Michie.
2 See, for example, the comments in Rowe (17–19).
What does this episode tell us about Jesus' identity? Matthew is clear. These 'works' are the 'works of the Messiah' (*ta erga tou Christou*; Matt 11:2). But did John intend the term 'the coming one' to refer to the 'Messiah'? And did Jesus intend to affirm such a title for himself with his answer? Jesus does not actually claim a title for himself, but simply points to what is happening in and through his ministry. Scholars have debated whether John's term, 'the coming one', is a reference to God or to an agent of God; and if the latter, who is it? A messianic figure? Elijah? Some other figure? With the recent publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls document 4Q521, the question has become even more intriguing. This late 2nd- or early 1st-century BC text mentions one or more 'anointed ones', 'messiahs', and speaks of the 'marvellous works' that the Lord (*adonai*) will do (in the messianic era?), including giving sight to the blind, raising up those who are bowed down, making the dead to live, and proclaiming good news to the poor (cf Matt 11:2–6). Who is the agent of these deeds? The text is not clear. It appears to be God himself. Or is it an agent of God, such as Elijah? We do not need to settle the question here. The point is that Jesus' answer is to be understood within the framework of Jewish expectation such as 4Q521 attests. Within that framework Jesus' answer might have suggested various possibilities to John and other contemporaries. Is Jesus Elijah returned? Is he the Davidic Messiah? Or is he someone even greater than that? Perhaps it is precisely the multiplicity of possibilities that led Matthew to specify that Jesus' works are the works of the Messiah, while he relegates John the Baptist to the status of Elijah (11:14).

We can see how important narrative is for Jesus' identity in Matthew if we consider this episode within the larger context of the gospel. In Matthew's narrative the phrase 'works of the Messiah' refers to Jesus' preaching and mighty deeds in chapters 5–9. Clearly we are to understand Jesus' preaching and mighty deeds as works of the Messiah. Yet then we recall that Jesus is, as Matthew tells us, 'God with us' (1:23). A first-century reader of Matthew with a knowledge of scripture and raised in the Jewish world to which 4Q521...
attests can hardly decide whether Matthew, by narrating Jesus’ preaching and mighty deeds, intends his audience to view Jesus as Davidic Messiah or as a representative of God—indeed, as ‘God with us’—and probably one is not meant to decide: Jesus is both, and his ‘works’ are testimony to both. Each ‘title’ depends on its relationship to the other. Who Jesus is as Messiah (and as God) can only be understood on the basis of the narrative that is told about him.\textsuperscript{11}

We could give other examples of the importance of narrative Christology,\textsuperscript{12} but these two should suffice to show how important the narrative shape of the gospels is to understanding Jesus’ identity.

\textit{Narrative in the gospel tradition}

I mentioned that one of the liabilities of an exclusively narrative criticism is that it cannot handle elements of texts that are better explained on the basis of the underlying tradition. Another problem is that it can lose touch with history.\textsuperscript{13} It is well and good if the written gospels give us compelling narratives about Jesus. But if those narrative representations are not based on history, do they matter? This is ultimately a question about the ‘historical Jesus’. Before we come to that topic, however, we consider the history of the gospel tradition.

One result of the form-critical approach to the gospels was the fracturing of the Jesus story. The leading form critics in Germany such as Karl Ludwig Schmidt and, following in his train, Rudolf Bultmann and Martin Dibelius, regarded the gospel tradition as basically ‘pericope tradition’. That is, the gospel story was not passed on (in oral tradition) in the early years as a coherent, whole story with an overarching narrative framework (ie, from the baptism or birth of Jesus to his suffering, death, and resurrection). Rather, there were stories (pericopes) about Jesus, and preachers did not necessarily hold these many stories together to produce a coherent narrative about Jesus or a coherent Christology. It was only when Mark, at a relatively late time, ordered the material into a coherent gospel narrative that one could speak of an extended story of Jesus. Although some scholars, most notably C H Dodd (1932), took exception, this view became the majority view.

The result was that each pericope was regarded as more or less self-contained, and, while similar patterns in the construction of pericopes could be observed, the picture of Jesus in any given pericope did not necessarily have anything to with the picture of Jesus in any other pericope. In time scholars claimed to find different Christologies in different strands of the gospel tradition: a non-messianic teacher of wisdom in Q; a divine man (\textit{theios anēr}) Christology in the Markan and Johannine miracle sources; a Gnostic-

\textsuperscript{11} The examples given invite contemplation of the doctrine of the two natures of Christ. Narrative Christology has attracted interest among systematic theologians. See, for example, Wilson, who suggests that one way of explicating the orthodox, one person-two natures doctrine of classical Christology today might be in terms of a narrative Christology according to which Jesus Christ unites two narratives in one agent or two agents in one narrative.

\textsuperscript{12} See, for example, Boring; Malbon; Tannehill; among others.

\textsuperscript{13} 4Q521 shows how useful historical considerations remain even for narrative analysis.
like redeemer and revealer in the Johannine discourses; and so forth. Each of these portraits, it was thought, might have once stood by itself, even to the exclusion of the others. It was only when Mark and the other writing evangelists subordinated all of this diverse material to the kerygma of the crucified and risen Messiah that unified pictures of Jesus began to emerge.

It is interesting to observe, however, that the pendulum may now be swinging in the other direction. New Testament scholars are raising once again the question whether the gospels as we have them do not in fact presuppose one or more extended narratives of Jesus at an oral stage of the tradition. The passion narrative, of course, has long been thought to have taken form as an extended narrative at a very early time. But more than one scholar has proposed in more recent years that the whole gospel of Mark derives from a tradition of extended, gospel storytelling (Dewey; Shiner). If that is correct, conventional approaches to Christology that regard the gospel of Mark as something of a tour de force in synthesising a variety of earlier, differing Christologies or of preferring one to the exclusion of others, may at the very least have to be rethought. A single Christology may have been at work shaping the story of the gospel of Mark for some time before it was written. Remarkably, even in the case of the so-called ‘Q’ material, long thought to represent a source devoid of narrative interests, there are now attempts to discern its narrative world (eg, Labahn), or, more boldly, even to locate some of its material within a larger narrative framework not radically different from the gospel of Mark.14 We must consider the possibility that common patterns of storytelling shaped the gospel tradition at an early time, and that in some cases these patterns of storytelling may have presupposed a common Christology.

Allow me one example. It is striking that the gospel accounts of the early phase of Jesus’ ministry reveal a deep interest in Jesus’ ‘authority’ (exousia). For instance, the gospel of Mark portrays Jesus, endowed with the Holy Spirit at his baptism (Mark 1), as coming on the scene with great authority. He calls the first disciples, and they drop their nets at once and immediately follow him. Then, in his first public act, Jesus teaches ‘as one having authority’ (hōs exousian echōn) in the synagogue in Capernaum (1:22) and exorcises a demon by his commanding word, which further demonstrates his ‘authority’ (exousia) (1:23–28). While we cannot demonstrate the point here, exegesis of this passage reveals that Mark intends to portray Jesus as acting by God’s own power: Jesus does not appeal to God for power over the demonic, but acts in and with God’s own power.15 In good Old Testament conceptuality, Jesus’ exousia is his uninhibited sovereignty (Scholtissek 54), by which he, like God himself, triumphs over the enemies of God. Jesus’ word is God’s word. Moreover, there is a concern to show that Jesus’ words and deeds are integrally connected. Jesus ‘acts’ through his word. Mark 2:1–12 portrays Jesus as the Son of

14 This is my approach in Hultgren 2002. Something of a similar approach has been commended by Schröter (2001: 140–79; 2004: 73–74).
15 See, eg, the exegesis in Scholtissek: 81–137.
Man—that is, as the eschatological ruler (or judge)\(^{16}\) to whom God has granted authority (cf Dan 7:13–14)—who has the authority (exousia) to forgive sins as God himself does. Here too, words and deeds are integrated. Jesus speaks, and it is done: sins are forgiven, a paralytic walks.

This emphasis on Jesus’ divine authority might be viewed as a special Markan feature if it were not for the fact that the same emphasis is found elsewhere in the gospels: Matt 8:5–10,13/Luke 7:1–10; and John 5:1–30. Two observations are especially striking: (1) Both of these accounts occur early in the respective accounts of Jesus’ ministry; and (2) they appear in sources or strata of tradition for which we have no reason to think that they depend on Mark (Matt 8:5–10,13/Luke 7:1–10 being so-called ‘Q’ material; and John, whose independence from the synoptic gospels is generally granted today).

In the ‘Q’ story, a gentile centurion in or near Capernaum asks Jesus only to ‘say the word’ and his servant will be healed, for the centurion believes in Jesus as a man working under and with (divine) authority (exousia) who, like himself, only needs to say the word, and it is done. As in Mark 1:23–28, the commanding power of Jesus’ word to heal points to the divine power of Jesus’ word, for in biblical faith God is the one who speaks and it is done.\(^{17}\) Thus we have the same focus on the power of Jesus’ word that we find in Mark. Moreover, as commentators have often noted, the story of the centurion in Capernaum almost certainly followed immediately the great Sermon (Matthew: Sermon on the Mount; Luke: Sermon on the Plain) in the stratum of tradition from which these materials were taken (‘Q’).\(^{18}\) Given that narrative order, the focus on the power of Jesus’ word in Matt 8:8//Luke 7:7 not only points to the divine power to accomplish mighty deeds that is inherent in Jesus’ word, but it also validates Jesus’ teaching in the immediately preceding Sermon on the Mount/Plain as being of divine authority.\(^{19}\) Indeed, the Sermon ends with Jesus’ call to build one’s life on his words. To build one’s life on Jesus’ words is to build one’s life on God’s words.

Finally, in John 5 we have a series of three episodes consisting of the healing of a lame man (5:2–9a, 14b), in which Jesus heals by his word, controversy with ‘the Jews’ (5:9b–18), and a monologue of Jesus (5:19–30).\(^{20}\) Significantly, the healing in John has very close parallels with the healing of the paralytic in Mark 2:1–12.\(^{21}\) Moreover, after the controversy with ‘the Jews’ over Jesus’ healing on the Sabbath, in which Jesus claims the right to work on the Sabbath even as God continues to work on the Sabbath,

\(^{16}\) The Son of Man figure is given more the features of a ruler than a judge in Dan 7:13–14, but later developments such as we see in the Parables of Enoch (1 Enoch 37–71) lend the Son of Man figure judicial features, and that is what we also find in the New Testament. See Nickelsburg: 149.

\(^{17}\) Gen 1:3, 9; 11; Ps 33:6, 9; etc.

\(^{18}\) The sequence is preserved in Luke (6:20–49 followed immediately by 7:1–10). Matthew breaks the sequence only to report the cleansing of the leper outside Capernaum (8:1–4).

\(^{19}\) Note that in Matthew 7:28,29 the evangelist draws on Mark 1:21,22 (Jesus was teaching ‘as one having authority’) and applies the words to the contents of the Sermon.

\(^{20}\) The monologue continues to 5:47, but 5:30 is an initial conclusion; 5:30 forms an inclusio with 5:19.

\(^{21}\) Jesus’ words in John 5:8 are—with the exception of a kai—identical to his words in Mark 2:9.
Jesus’ monologue, in which he as the Son defends his right to act as the Father does, culminates in his declaration about the authority (exousia) that the Father has given him to judge, because he is Son of Man.

Thus we find a common Christology, and even common story patterns, shaping the gospel traditions in the early sections of Mark, ‘Q’, and John, presumably independently of each other. That suggests that the gospel tradition, or at least a significant part of it, was stamped at a relatively early time by a common Christology, with a focus on Jesus’ divine authority. This Christology caused the material to be shaped as narrative in similar ways, with Jesus’ words and deeds intimately intertwined under the rubric of his authority. A Son of Man Christology—still clearly visible in Mark 2:10 and John 5:27—served this story pattern well, since the Son of Man figure and the authority given to him according to the imagery of Daniel 7:13,14 offered an unmatched concept (and title) for speaking of Jesus’ share in or representation of God’s power. In these major strands of the tradition, the story of Jesus could not be told without reference to his divine authority and without an integrated view of his words and deeds.

The ‘Historical Jesus’

We come now to the last—which of course is really the first—stage in the gospel tradition, that of the historical Jesus himself. Jesus’ ministry was deeply rooted in the faith and life of Israel, whose identity was constituted in an essential way through (hi)story. Because Jesus understood himself to fulfil the Old Testament scriptures, it was inevitable that the meaning of his life, death, and resurrection ultimately had to be explicated within the framework of that story. How Jesus read the scriptures and how his reading of the scriptures might have shaped the course of his ministry is a large question, which we cannot enter here. It is interesting to ponder, however, whether Jesus had a sense of how the ‘story’ of his own ministry had to unfold. It seems very likely that he did. The different Christologies that scholars have claimed to find in the various strands of the gospel tradition have led in turn to very different, even irreconcilable reconstructions of the historical Jesus. It is worth asking, however, whether some of the titles drawn from scripture and applied to Jesus by his followers might have already directed Jesus himself to some key texts, on the basis of which he charted the course (the ‘story’) of his own ministry.

Take again, for example, the term/title ‘Son of Man’. As is well known, in the synoptic gospels Jesus’ Son of Man sayings are of three varieties: the ‘present’ sayings, of the Son of Man presently active on earth; the ‘suffering’ sayings, of the Son of Man who must suffer, die, and be raised; and the ‘future’ sayings, of the Son of Man who will come in future glory to judge. Very distinctive is Jesus’ third-person use of the term Son of Man to refer to his present activities (eg, Matt 8:20; 11:19). With this usage Jesus presumably did not mean to refer to himself as the exalted figure of Daniel 7:13–14. Rather, he used the term for himself in the sense of Aramaic bar nasha, with the modesty and reserve that the term conveys (Vermes: 160–68, 188–91). Might he, however, have used the term deliberately in the belief that, after a ministry of service and humility (humiliation), God
would exalt him to be the Son of Man figure of Daniel 7:13,14, as the gospels suggest (eg, Mark 14:62)? This view has met with much scepticism (eg, Tödt: 14–16). But is it really so doubtful? If Jesus saw his work unfolding within the framework of the words of the prophets, including Isaiah 52:13–53:12, such a 'life story pattern' is in fact what we would expect. It is noteworthy that the contours of all four gospels, as different as they are, cohere with such an overall 'life story': a life of service, particularly a ministry of healing, accompanied by rejection; followed by suffering and death; followed by God's vindication of Jesus in the resurrection. That we find such overall agreement in the story pattern of the gospels is unlikely to be mere coincidence or after-the-fact retrojection. That Jesus saw this pattern as basic to his ministry is suggested by the fact that he summed it up in his own words: 'The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many' (Mark 10:45). 'Whoever would be great among you will be your servant, and whoever would be first among you will be slave of all' (10:43). 'Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted' (Matt 23:12). In Jesus' way of seeing things, true exaltation is something that can be granted only by God. Apart from such exaltation, life is to be lived in humility and service. Thus, I am suggesting, the significance of Jesus' identity as Son of Man was, in a sense, worked out by Jesus himself as his own life story unfolded. It was completed by God. Did Jesus place his hope for the completion of his life story precisely with the One whom he called 'Father'? Why should we not think so?

In challenging the form-critical view that the narrative framework of the Gospel of Mark was artificial, the great Cambridge New Testament scholar C H Dodd wrote (1932: 397):

Is [the] association of narratives [in Mark] dominated by a particular motive necessarily artificial or arbitrary? Let us put it in this way: Was there, or was there not, a point in the life of Jesus at which He summoned His followers to accompany Him to Jerusalem with the prospect of suffering and death? Is it, or is it not, likely that from that point on His thought and His speech dwelt with especial emphasis upon the theme of this approaching Passion? Surely it is on every account likely. Thus, if one particular section of the Gospel is dominated by that theme, it is not because Mark has arbitrarily assembled from all quarters isolated pericopae referring to the approaching Passion, but because these pericopae originally and intrinsically belong to this particular phase of the Ministry.

22 Scholars of an older generation considered such a picture of the historical Jesus to be plausible. See, for example, Manson (101–19). The main reason for scepticism has been the argument that the suffering Son of Man and the future (parousia) Son of Man sayings belong to different strands of the gospel tradition. The sayings stood unconnected in the earliest stage of the tradition and cannot both be traced back to Jesus (Tödt: 14,15). That reconstruction, however, is highly unlikely.

23 In other words, Jesus combined the pattern of humiliation and exaltation of the “suffering servant” in Isaiah 52:13–53:12 with the exaltation of the Son of Man in Daniel 7:13,14. That Isaiah’s servant figure could be conflated with the Danielic Son of Man in a pattern of humiliation/rejection and vindication is confirmed by the parables of Enoch (1 Enoch 37–71). See Nickelsburg: 138–41.
Dodd considered that this principle should apply to other themes in the gospel narrative, such as the people’s unbelief towards Jesus. I would include other themes, such as Jesus’ ministry of healing. The roots of the way that the story of Jesus was later told should be sought in the way that Jesus’ own life story unfolded.

**Conclusion: reflections on narrative Christology, theology, and preaching**

It has been said that post-modernity has brought an end to the meta-narrative, that is, an end to the possibility of a comprehensive narrative in which all other narratives find their place. The post-modern mind, we are told, celebrates difference over unity, a plurality of truths over all-encompassing truth. The deconstruction of the Bible as a unified narrative in theology and biblical scholarship in the last three centuries—Old Testament vs. New Testament; John vs. the synoptics; Mark vs, Q; various early Christologies against each other; different and ultimately irreconcilable reconstructions of the historical Jesus—has served post-modern ideologies well.

Is it possible, however, for a confessional church to subscribe to such a view of reality? I would argue that by its confessional commitments the Lutheran church has bound itself irreversibly to a meta-narrative as found in the canon of scripture and in the ancient creeds. That does not mean that the church does not recognise diversity in the canon: ‘Matthew is not Mark is not Luke is not John’. Each of these gospels does in fact give us a different picture of Jesus. The ancient church was wise not to constrain itself to choose among them or to harmonize them; for the church is enriched by each of the gospels in different ways.

One of the functions of narrative, it has been suggested, is to reconcile diversity and identity in personhood; for narrative enables one to speak of continuity of identity in the midst of change. It seems that the church’s canon of scripture functions in that way. The Bible tells of the God of Israel speaking and working over many centuries, among many peoples. It contains the words of many prophets and apostles. But it bears witness to one God. The gospels give different pictures of Jesus, but they bear witness to the same person. It was perhaps necessary that there be more than one gospel narrative; the sheer fullness of the person that Jesus was and is demanded it. To discuss that point we would need to venture into areas of Christology and the philosophy of personhood too large to handle here. In any case, even while we celebrate the diverse pictures of Jesus in the gospel narratives, we should seek to discern the unity of Jesus’ identity that underlies them. Precisely the fact of the canon—the fact that four gospels, with all their differences, sit, sometimes uncomfortably, next to each other in a single book, within a single narrative of scripture—should impel us to ask after the One who holds it all together. I have suggested that the contours of the gospel tradition and the overall contours of Jesus’ life story as we find it in the gospels give us important glimpses into an identity that held the story together—at all stages—from the beginning.

24 Often cited is Lyotard 1979. Of course Lyotard is hardly decisive.
I close with some thoughts about the relevance of all this to preaching. Many preachers like to employ narrative (‘stories’) in their preaching. There is nothing wrong with using stories as such. Many features of narrative lend themselves naturally to preaching: the movement of plot and character, imagery, surprise, irony, humour, and others. An attendant risk of ‘telling stories’ in preaching, however, is that our stories will replace the story. Any story that the preacher tells should be normed by and should illuminate the story of scripture, particularly the gospels. The above-mentioned features of narrative are not lacking in the gospels; on the contrary, the gospels are full of them. We should use them to the full in our preaching.

Front and centre in preaching from the gospels must stand the question: Who is Jesus Christ for us? The gospels not only contain important features of narrative; they contain stories that touch on the deepest matters of human existence: death and life; sin, salvation and eternal life; faith and doubt; fear and joy; suffering and hope; tragedy, failure, and victory. As Jesus in the gospels is drawn into these aspects of human existence and responds to them in word and deed, his identity is disclosed, and we find answers to the question: Who is Jesus Christ for us? It is the preacher’s responsibility to know the biblical story in its whole and in its parts, and to know how the whole and the parts fit together. The scriptural story becomes the meta-narrative in which all other narratives find their place. We invite people to interpret their own stories within the story, and there to find their own identity as children of God.

References


