

In what story are we living?

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Key words: God's story, metanarrative, drama, Scripture

Around ANZAC Day this year, some suggested that we, as Australians, probably should not try to date our identity from the Gallipoli campaign. No doubt these comments were treated as heresy by many celebrating on the day but they do raise an interesting argument surrounding the “Who am I?” question. One of the points being made is that we could hardly call ourselves fully *Australian* because of Gallipoli, when the original inhabitants have called the continent home for tens of thousands of years.

Do we define ourselves as Australians because we live in a history that dates from the Constitution change in 1967, or from Gallipoli in 1914, or from Federation in 1901, or should we feel that we are a part of a history that dates back tens of millennia? Each of these has a different “feel” to it in terms of our self-definition. All of the inhabitants of this country have arrived from elsewhere at one time or another and have been adopted by it, as it were. But there is a qualitatively different “feel” of the identity that we can experience if we consider ourselves proudly to be part of what we are told of the oldest continuous culture on earth, compared with one's own relatively brief lifetime.

We live in the stories of our memories, but in a post-Gutenberg age we have so many more recorded memories that at times can be traced back several centuries. Personally, does the story I inhabit begin more than half a century ago with my birth, or when my ancestors arrived on the First and Third Fleets, or perhaps with the Norman invasion of Britain? Our mental or emotional placement into our particular story, in this sense, may be defined genetically, by traditional arrangements such as a marriage covenant, or legally, as by adoption (either into a family as a child or into a culture as a migrant).

Stories are profoundly important to us, as evidenced in the Bible by the importance of story for the oral cultures of ancient times. Today we continue to be “story people” surrounded by stories in novels, films, television programs and so on. These may be recognised, or not, as being non-fiction, fiction,

or fake news designed to deceive. Stories, by their very nature, follow a path through time and, as we see ourselves doing just that, it is not surprising that they captivate and fascinate us as we make links from some other story to our own. So, encapsulated in this delight in story, is the feeling we have of being a part of a story that is our life but also part of stories that are much larger than we are. The interest of sectors of the population in this has led to the development of television series such as “Who do you think you are?” and online applications such as Ancestry.com. And if we feel dissatisfied with our story, then the media is happy to supply us with a range of stories in which, for a short time, we may fantasise that we are a part.

The comments above regarding historical placement, however, are by no means universally applicable in practice. It appears that many in self-obsessed, individualistic societies prefer to live in our own small, somewhat isolated, story. Many in recent generations have little interest in generational stories or history, or even in current events around the world—people whom Mellman (2015) refers to as “the young and the newsless”. As Adrian Gill (2013) reflected: “We don't go in for ancestors in my family, we're not hereditary folk. It's not that we don't have them, it's just that we don't think they're what's interesting about us. You are what you achieve” (p. 1). Rather than drawing on the essence of who we are, there emerges a preference for a qualitative personal identity (Splitter, 2016) that is often drawn from connections made with those whose qualities (appearance, beliefs, dispositions, behaviours, doctrines, and so on) we believe indicate adherence to a similar story to our own—even though the match will never correspond exactly.

Whatever our recognized attitude might be to the origins, structure, and end point of our stories, it seems that there is a universal underlying assumption regarding the importance of a narrative of our being:

Heritage is distilled story, just as honey is distilled sunlight. And like honey, heritage feeds us, enriching our lives with vividness and purpose, giving meaning and identity. At a very real level,

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heritage is who we are. Our grasp of time, of story, lets us make space meaningful. It lets us create the sacred, self-medicating to quench the deep thirst for reverence. (Farrelly, 2018, paragraph 17)

The thirst for reverence, and relevance, manifests in many forms. While individuals in individualistic cultures see themselves mostly living in a range of individual stories, and those living in collectivist cultures see themselves living mostly in the family story, we must be compelled to consider the bigger stories of history and, most importantly, the biggest story of all. We live in God's story—the God-defined metanarrative that underpins our lives.

Because God is the Creator and Sustainer of all things, whether we recognize it or not, we are all inextricably embedded in His story. (This is the case even if we do not believe it or even deny His existence.) As a number of authors have written, His story may be seen as a drama in which we have roles to play. Craig Bartholomew and Mike Goheen (2014) like to say that we live in Acts 29, but we could also say we live in Revelation 3:23. Neither of these references exist in the biblical text but they are the *space where we live* as part of God's story—in the era of the post-New Testament Church in Acts 29, and between the letters to the churches and the end times in Revelation 3:23. That is where we live and have our being in God's grand narrative of His Creation, the Fall, Redemption and the Fulfilment.

Two days before ANZAC Day in 2012, my first wife was informed that she had an untreatable, terminal cancer and had only months to live. She passed away at home six months later. Caring for her through that time and then losing a soul mate of thirty-seven years was, naturally, difficult. The things that sustained me through those months and the months that followed, were her testimony of God's grace and the deep belief that, while painful, it was still all right. We were living, and both now continue to live, in God's great story. The comfort that knowledge gave was, and still is, of enormous personal significance.

As with our inclusion in other stories, we can see ourselves in God's story first "genetically" as he created us in His image. Despite this, human beings, since time immemorial, have decided we do not like His story and want to live in one of our own creation. We have disagreed about His story's beginning, and its end, but it has been the here and now that has been particularly painful for us because we want that to be *ours*. God, however, made a way for us join His story: by marriage covenant as part of His Church, the Bride of Christ, or by being adopted into His family—migrating from our own story, or a story set by others, into His story.

Based on "Biblical Theology", inhabiting God's story is a foundational principle in the postgraduate courses I have taught at the National Institute for Christian Education for some years. In research, I have conducted with graduates I have repeatedly seen the transformation that has taken place in their lives and teaching as a result of the recognition that they are living in God's story. Knowing the beginning and end of the story, and the purpose and direction of life under God's direction, changes our notion of who we are. All living, including classroom teaching, therefore becomes qualitatively different.

The education authorities may set a compulsory curriculum based on a secularist or consumerist story but teaching it out of a different story, God's story, provides students with an alternative story framework they would not otherwise have had. While we may "live" the story before our students, how might we talk meaningfully to them about what such living means?

This is a particular problem when young people seem to live only in the present—however at an assumption, or unconscious, level they will all still inevitably be well embedded in one story or another. In this context, the search for an appropriate apologetic for today brings to mind God's question to Moses, "What is that in your hand?" (Exodus 4:2). What do we have at hand? Although God connects constantly with us, there should be times that we can specifically identify as His work in our lives, making us aware that we are not living primarily in our own story or one invented by others. If we have a genuine allegiance to the Lord of the universe, then we have a story to tell of living in His grand Story, as well as a series of small stories of Him living alongside us. **TEACH**

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