52 Original Wisdom Stories

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Thereby Hangs a Tale
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Urban Angel (with Stewart Henderson)

52

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Short lively pieces for the Christian year

Penelope Wilcock

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For Pearl Thornton, with my love

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Foreword

I was for some years a tutor for trainee local preachers in the Methodist Church. When it came to writing a sermon, there were questions to be borne in mind:

- How will this build the faith of the hearers?
- Where is the Good News in what I have said?

And, crucially:

- How does it help make a bridge linking contemporary living and the eternal gospel?

In writing this book I have asked the same questions.

I have particularly tried to address three issues I believe urgently require attention from the church of today.

Firstly, I wanted to look at the phenomenon of what I have come across described as "the Dones". That is, Christian people – committed, faithful, believing, many of whom have held responsible leadership positions – who, for one reason or another, are absolutely done with church. They don't go any more. They have not left the church, they are still part of it, but they are no longer church*goers*. This group of people is increasing, and it should cause us to look long and hard at what we now mean by membership of the church. What does it mean to belong to the household of faith but not attend public worship? The format of this book is a series of conversations between a fictional husband and wife couple, Sid and Rosie. Both of them have stopped attending the mainstream church. One has become a Quaker, the other attends here and there, now and then. But both of them are serious believers. They offer us an opportunity to ask ourselves some questions about the growing segment of the church they represent. Another thing about Sid and Rosie is that

both of them take marriage seriously but both are divorced and remarried. They offer us the opportunity to consider the situation now facing us – almost every family we know includes members who have been through divorce; yet we know Christian marriage is a blessing of God and a good foundation for sane and healthy family life. What ethical Christian framework can we work out that honestly recognizes our situation, and shapes a compassionate, realistic discipline of life that does not rely on putting its head in the sand?

Secondly, the church must get to grips with the immense spiritual implications of climate change. Serious scientists are talking about the year 2030 as a tipping point, and are saying we have now passed the point of no return: the human race can expect perhaps 100 years of life left, in conditions of increasing scarcity and environmental degradation. Crafting a theology of hope and compassion for the years ahead is perhaps the most vital task of today's church. This book offers a number of opportunities to engage with the issues raised.

Thirdly, the church is changing. Cathedral worship attendance is increasing, informal home-based church is increasing (in Iran, for example), and community churches (like New Frontiers and Kings Church) are increasing, even as church as we once knew it is still dwindling in numbers (though often vital and satisfying in any particular individual congregation). The changes in form have many implications, one being that those attending worship in the newer manifestations of church may have no experience or understanding of the old liturgical structures – their meaning, purpose and origin. Why does this matter? Because the traditional structure of the ecclesiastical year gave a rounded education in the life of Christ and the themes of the gospel, whereas an unstructured year brings a strong risk of the importation of a "personal canon" – emphasis on the pet preoccupations of the pastor. This book works through the main fasts and feasts of the traditional ecclesiastical year, including

some of the feasts of our most beloved and significant saints (not all). It also identifies the ecclesiastical feasts of the ancient Celtic church (pre-Council of Whitby) and explains how they were built upon the rhythms of the pre-Christian agricultural year. This in turn offers us a fascinating glimpse into a non-confrontational method of evangelism – one that takes no adversarial stance towards the receiving culture, but that works with it to gently illuminate what is already there with the light and hope of the gospel.

The book can be used for personal devotion or public reading in small groups and church services. My prayer is that it may achieve its objectives of building your faith; revealing the Good News and the vital, essential importance it must play in the context of increasing fragmentation in the modern world; building a bridge between contemporary living and the eternal truth of the gospel; and deepening understanding concerning the nature and purpose of the structure of the ecclesiastical year.

Pen Wilcock
November 2014

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Advent 1 – The Beginning

"An oak tree," said Sid, "grows for 300 years, rests for 300 years, and takes 300 years to die."

Comfortable in his battered easy chair, his gaze rests peacefully on the glowing embers and falling ash of the fire at the end of this long, dark November evening. The wind blusters and gusts round the roof and walls of this old house.

Rosie – Sid's wife – hunts in the pile of wools beside her for her scissors. She wants to change colour. She can bite through the yarn she's on at the moment, but is familiar with the feeling of small wool fibres impossible to get out of her mouth afterwards, and doesn't like it. "That's a long time," she says, absently. She feels behind her – ah! There they are. "300 years. It sounds kind of… sad."

"The dying part?"

"Yes."

"Well, I know what you mean," says Sid, "but in reality it's full of surprising hope and regeneration. In its dying, an oak tree not only feeds on itself – consumes its own nutrients – it sustains a whole fantastic range of other living beings as well: beetles and all manner of wriggly things and little creeps. That's how it is with a tree. A wise man said, although in a forest you can see fallen trees, decaying stumps and leaf mould, it's more truly metamorphosis than death. He[1] said, 'Death is not the opposite of life. Life has no opposite. The

1 Eckhart Tolle, *A New Earth*, Penguin, 2005.

opposite of death is birth. Life is eternal.' It's an ouroboros."

Rosie looks up from her crochet. "Come again?"

Sid chuckles. "Don't you know that word? The snake that swallows its own tail. It's a really ancient symbol. Big. Big in meaning, that is. It can represent primordial unity. Or it can be like the phoenix rising from the ashes – 'In my end is my beginning.' It represents something – life, prāṇa, ch'i, the Tao, the Holy Spirit; whatever you call it – that exists with no identifiable beginning, and persists with such intrinsic power that it cannot be destroyed. Like the light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness can neither comprehend nor extinguish it.[2] It just goes on."

Rosie frowns at her pile of yarns, trying to decide between two greens. It goes well with purple, but if you don't get the shade right it looks garish.

"Right… " She hopes she sounds encouraging. "And the oak tree… er…"

Sid smiles. He knows she is indulging him, but without someone to at least pretend to listen to his thoughts, he would be lonely.

"It's not the oak tree, it's the life in the oak tree. Life persists like an ouroboros – it cannot be lost. It has no end and no beginning. It is eternal. The old Celts knew about it. The quarter days and cross-quarter days of the Celtic agricultural year track it. Before the church went over to the Roman way of doing things after the Council of Whitby, the ecclesiastical year, modelled an ouroboros, told the story of eternal life."

The sage green is best, the quiet grey-green with its pure, silvery tone. It lets the purple sing. That brighter hue makes it shout. She joins the new yarn to the old end.

"Oh, right? And we're just coming to the end of the cycle, then."

"No. Yes. No."

She glances up at him over the rim of her glasses, amused. "Make up your mind!"

2 John 1:5 (my paraphrase of all translations).

"Well – " Sid is hesitant, not because he is unsure but because he cares about this. Eagerness steals into his voice. If he starts to tell her about this, he wants to be heard, to really be able to say it. He looks at her. Rosie is listening.

"The thing about the Celtic day," he explains, "is that it doesn't begin in the morning. It starts at sundown – like the Jewish sabbath, I guess. So the old Celts, who rated dreams highly – also like the ancient Jews – believed our dreams were not us processing the day gone but preparing for the day coming. And as with the day, so with the year. The Celtic year starts as the sun goes down, not as it rises. Yul, 'the turn' (it's an old Viking word), marks the moment when the infant light is born, and the year turns towards the light. So, that's like the year's dawn. And the year ends with Samhain, the day of the dead. When the Irish missionaries brought the gospel, they didn't try to overthrow the old ways, they worked with them, saw wisdom in them. So they settled the feast of All Saints on the day of the dead. It was a special time, what the Celts called a thin time, when the veil between the everyday world and the realm of weird became diaphanous. On that day, the people remembered their ancestors, those they had loved and who had taught them wisdom and truth. The people they belonged to who had passed into the unseen world. So it made sense to set All Saints on that day of observance. And of course, they made Yul – the turn, the birth of the infant light – into the feast of the Incarnation; the baby Jesus, light of the world.

"But then, what about the space between the end of the year at Samhain and the dawn of the new year at Yul? Oh, Rosie, this is where it gets exciting! It's so *interesting*!"

She smiles at his enthusiasm – this is one of the things she loves about Sid. "Go on," she says. "I'm crocheting, but I'm listening too."

"Well, after Samhain comes No-Time. You know I said about the oak tree growing, then resting, then dying? You know how there are different stages of labour when a baby is born – the first stage opens up the womb, the second stage is the power rush of pushing

energy, but between them comes a nameless hiatus of deep rest?[3] Well, No-Time is like that hiatus, the nameless space in the giving of life; and, in the turning year, the space between death and life. It's not clear how long exactly No-Time lasted, but remember the Celtic day starts with evening. No-Time is the evening that begins the coming year. The Irish missionaries settled Advent on it. Advent is the evening with which the new year begins."

"So… the new year isn't January the first?"

"No. Yul is the turn, and we celebrate the Incarnation then; but the beginning is this bit, the evening of the year's day. And the church made Advent a time to look forward to the coming of Christ the King. In Advent they focused on both the coming of the baby at Bethlehem – the infant Light born in deepest darkness – and the coming of Christ in glory, as judge. Do you see, by doing this they crowned Christ King of the all-important circle of the Celtic agricultural year. They were farmers, it meant everything to them. The missionaries built it right into their pattern of life, the implication: 'Jesus is Lord'.

"No-Time, where we are now, the year holds its breath, looks forward to the new. The old is gone and the new has not yet begun. The Celtic day starts with evening, and that's why Advent, at the end of the old year, is the beginning of the church's year. This is where we enter the ouroboros, because this is the end, the year is dying, going down into its deepest darkness, its oblivion. But in its end is its beginning. So because this is the end, and life is eternal, forever renewing itself – this is the beginning."

For sharing and wondering

- Describe your favourite trees.
- What have been the really big beginnings and endings in your life?
- When you think about dying – your own death, or the death of people close to you –what sort of feelings are stirred up?

3 Sheila Kitzinger described this hiatus as "rest and be thankful".

Into the Mystery

Eternal God, source of all that is, your being is the only power, your grace runs through the cosmos, the life-giving blood, the rising sap. So steep us in the quietness of your presence that our little lives may attain the stability and peace of your wisdom, your love, your truth.