Imagine yourself telling a fairy story to a child or group of children! Try changing any of the details of the story and you will discover something significant about audiences and expectation: there is no way a five year old will permit ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ become Little Black Riding Hood! Hansel and Gretel will not become George and Gretel! Goldilocks will not countenance a fourth bear, and even in non-porridge-eating-households, muesli or flakes will not find their way into those bears’ bowls!

Changing Unchanging Stories
The faithfulness of children to the stories they love provides an interesting insight into a key difficulty that people have with the Bible. Many people, including people of deep and genuine faith, buy into ONE story and nothing changes. When we begin to sense the difference between what we expect a text to say, and what it actually says, we gloss over what is on the page and substitute the story we know. For example, when there is tension between God and Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels, refuge is taken by referring to Jesus in John where he says, ‘The Father and I are one.’ (10:30) Or in Matthew’s parable of the Treasure in the Field (13:44), little attention is paid to the detail that the man hides the treasure he has found or to the joy he experiences in the finding and in the knowledge of where the treasure is. And yet, these apparently insignificant details are essential for Matthew and the good news he has to share. For Matthew, the person of faith is the person who has not only found the treasure, but who is able to act even though the treasure remains hidden, and is not (yet) possessed. Consider the shift of energy that would occur were those of us who are in leadership in parishes, communities and various institutions to act more deeply out of the radical vision of the treasure(s) hidden within our parishes and our communities, within our schools and colleges, within our hospitals and care institutions. To miss the detail is to miss the freshness and power of God’s living word.

The evangelists and all the biblical authors rework the one great biblical story so that, as Luke puts it, we ‘may know the truth of the things of which we have been instructed.’ (1:4) Let us look at why stories can be reworked and re-read. This will hopefully permit us to appreciate how narratives function and how better to read and pray them.

Story and Discourse: The What and the How of Biblical Narratives
All narratives have two dimensions: the story itself and how the story is told. The story is what happens and why it happens [a person did X, then Y happened, and this resulted in Z]. How the story is told is term discourse. To cut to the chase, in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, there is only ONE story: Jesus always goes to Calvary, Jesus always has a Last Supper, Jesus always has a Last Supper, Jesus always has a Last Supper, Jesus always has a Last Supper, Jesus always has a Last Supper...

In the four New Testament Gospels, we have four different ‘tellings’ of the story of Jesus. In the four Gospels, we have one story and four discourses. Christians have always defended this diversity and the richness that comes in its wake. We have not always understood why we have done this, and our practice – e.g., in giving John a status higher than the other three Gospels – has frequently been at odds with it. That said, any large-scale attempt to smooth out differences in the four Gospels has been strongly resisted. For example, in the late second century, Tatian (c. 120–180 AD) sought to replace the four Gospels with a single harmonised narrative of Jesus called the Diatessaron. While this gospel harmony gained a significant foothold among some Eastern Christians, it was in the end firmly removed from Church use – a visceral affirmation of biblical discourse and its essential diversity.

Discourse, because it lies at the heart of narrative (and of poetry), lies at the heart of the Bible. Biblical discourse is the foundation of lectio divina. While lectio divina attends to the biblical story, it attends even more deeply to biblical discourse. Lectio divina is built upon attention to the words of the biblical text. In lectio (reading), the first movement of lectio divina, one attends to the text. At the beginning it can be a dull undertaking; it is work! It demands focus, freshness, openness, memory … and thought! As Michael Casey, with his characteristic insight, puts it, ‘one of the strongest deterrents to longterm fidelity to lectio divina is a sort of pious laziness that does not permit the mind to become actively engaged.’ Lectio (reading) is not only an engagement of
Having Life in His Name: Living, Thinking and Communicating the Christian Life of Faith
Edited by Brendan Leahy & Séamus O’Connell
Veritas, 2011

This book seeks to address the current ‘crisis of faith’, a crisis that has seen a continued call for a ‘renewal’ in the life of the Church. This calls for a deeper reflection on what the Christian faith means and what is the inherent meaning of belonging to the Church. If one is to have resurrection and life in the name of Jesus Christ, how can we actively set about to obtain this goal? The book’s tripartite structure: (Living in His Name; Thinking the Christian Life of Faith; and Communicating Life in Christ) unfolds this question.

Pádraig Corkery notes the role that Scripture can have upon our ongoing moral formation. Paul McPartlan focuses on belonging to the Church through becoming the body of Christ, thus we are called to be transformed in the reception of the Eucharist. For this transformation to be continuous the second part of this book reminds us that it is essential to critically reflect upon the content of the Christian faith and its meaning. Séamus O’Connell’s focal point is that the scriptural text invites us into dialogue, to engage and to meditate upon it: we are called to hear what the Word of God communicates to us, by becoming ever-more aware of the text. This call to awareness is not only an awareness to the text alone but through engagement, we should become, gradually, more knowing of ourselves. The Word of God invites us to be transformed: we are called to re-hear, to re-see, to re-know, to be re-newed.

The book’s articles aim to be guidelines for all people to begin afresh in pondering the faith in all its wonder, but also in its challenges. We are reminded that in belonging to the Church, our Christian faith provides fresh ground for interacting with others in dialogue concerning this meaning of the faith. This calls to mind that we are made in the image and likeness of God, thus individually and collectively, we ‘are called to act as responsible stewards’ in how we are living examples of thinking and communicating the faith which we profess by belonging to the community of the Church. How do we engage with these various issues in light of the recent scandals and other factors that have emerged seeking to create and cement a culture that embraces ‘a crisis of faith’? That remains for us, the community, to answer!

Catherine Punch

Séamus O’Connell
Professor of Sacred Scripture
St Patrick’s College, Maynooth, Co Kildare