

# Imagination and Narratives in Preaching: Homiletical Illustrations as an Alternative Mode of Experience, Knowledge and Understanding

Ole Vinther  
Denmark



<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5107-8949>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21827/ijh.5.117-138>

---

## Abstract

*Images and narratives in sermons have traditionally been understood as homiletical illustrations used primarily to create didactic understanding. Contemporary homileticians have challenged this view, for illustrations can be important experiences in themselves and be more than simply illustrations. But how are we then to understand the communicative power of imagination and narratives in preaching? This article discusses theoretical perspectives on imagination, narratives and preaching, and explores C. S. Lewis's thinking on imagination and narratives in detail. Based on this, it will be argued that homiletical illustrations can be seen as an alternative mode of experience and knowledge that in a unique and profound way can contribute significantly to our understanding of the Christian faith.*

**Keywords:** imagination; narrative rhetoric; homiletical illustrations; C. S. Lewis

---

## 1. Introduction

When Images and narratives in sermons have in homiletical literature from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries traditionally been understood as “illustrations” or as “windows on the word”.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of illustrations has been seen to bring light and to help the congregation see. As John A. Broadus says: “To illustrate, according to the etymology, is to throw light (or lustre) upon a subject”.<sup>2</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon in a similar vein likens illustrations with windows in a house. He states:

The chief reason for the construction of windows in a house is, as Fuller says, *to let in light*. Parables, similes, and metaphors have that effect; and hence we use them to *illustrate* our subject, or, in other words, to “*brighten it with light*,” for that is Dr. Johnson's literal rendering

---

<sup>1</sup> Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, Louisville 2016, 226–228. See also John A. Broadus, *A Treatise on the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, Philadelphia 1871, 213–229; Al Fasol, “Illustration in Preaching”, in: *Southwestern Journal of Theology* vol. 27 no. 2 (1985), 27–31; William E. Sangster, *The Craft of Sermon Illustration*, Basingstoke 1978; Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Art of Illustration*, New York 1894.

<sup>2</sup> Broadus (note 1), 213.

of the word *illustrate*. Often when didactic speech fails to enlighten our hearers we may make them see our meaning by opening a window and letting in the pleasant light of analogy.<sup>3</sup>

William E. Sangster also highlights the power of illustrations as a remedy for seeing. He says that, “[p]eople are convinced more by what they *see* than by what they *hear*. Illustrations help them to *see*.”<sup>4</sup> A major reason for this is that homiletical illustrations make us see something, that otherwise is obscure. As Al Fasol explains:

The illustration serves to make the less familiar cognizant to the congregation by the use of some analogy that is part of their lives or more familiar to them. Simply, any information that may not be easily understood by the congregation may be illuminated by an illustration that is easily understood by the congregation.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to this understanding, illustrations are in the homiletical literature also seen as persuasive, as ornamentation, as a means for awakening interest and attention, as an aid for the memory and as a means for arousing emotions.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, according to Aristotle, illustrations or examples function as a kind of evidence, either inductively or deductively.<sup>7</sup> In sum, illustrations are seen to have great communicative power. At the same time, however, illustrations are in the traditional homiletical literature seen as subordinate to the scriptural and doctrinal argument in a sermon.<sup>8</sup> Illustrations are “not so much to be seen as to be seen through”.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, according to Thomas G. Long often “congregations were more engaged by the illustrative material than by the conceptual parts of sermons”, and the reason, Long says, is that:

[S]tories, images, and examples contain more communicative power and energy than the terms “illustration” or “windows on the word” would allow. [...] Illustrations can be windows on the word, to be sure, but they can also be arenas for encountering, discerning, discovering, and experiencing the word as well.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> *Spurgeon* (note 1), 7–8.

<sup>4</sup> *Sangster* (note 1), 19.

<sup>5</sup> *Fasol* (note 1), 31. See also *Aristotle*, *Rhetoric*, i. 2. 19.

<sup>6</sup> *Broadus* (note 1), 213; *Fasol* (note 1), 28; *Sangster* (note 1), 18–22; *Spurgeon* (note 1), 57–102.

<sup>7</sup> *Aristotle* (note 5), ii. 20–24.

<sup>8</sup> E.g. *Spurgeon* (note 1), 16–17.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>10</sup> *Long* (note 1), 229.

Illustrations, thus, are not only used for creating didactic understanding. Illustrations can instead be important experiences in themselves. Fred B. Craddock has a similar point, when he says:

Actually, in good preaching what is referred to as illustrations are, in fact, stories or anecdotes which do not illustrate the point; rather they *are* the point. In other words, a story may carry in its bosom the whole message rather than the illumination of a message which had already been related in another but less clear way.<sup>11</sup>

As we can see, contemporary homileticians have challenged the traditional understanding of homiletical illustrations. The communicative power of images and narratives is greater than hitherto understood, it is said. Images and narratives are more than simply illustrations. However, if this is so, how are we then to understand and describe the role of images and narratives in a sermon?

In this article, focus will be on imagination, rather than on images *per se*, as well as on narratives. In the article it will be explored, how we can understand the communicative power of imagination and narratives in preaching.<sup>12</sup> To approach an answer, different strands of thought will be brought together. First, the article will discuss relevant theoretical perspectives on imagination and narratives in relation to preaching. Next, C. S. Lewis's views on imagination and narratives will be explored in detail, in order to get a deeper understanding of why and how imagination and narratives in his view are important for the communication of the Christian faith. Finally, the insights and understandings found will be analysed and discussed by use of the categories *mythos* and *logos*, and it will be argued that imagination and narratives in preaching can be seen as an alternative mode of experience and knowledge that in a unique and profound way can contribute significantly to our understanding of the Christian faith. Homiletical illustrations can therefore have a more profound role in preaching than the traditional theory of illustrations has appreciated.

## 2. Theoretical Perspectives on Imagination, Narratives and Preaching

Imagination can be defined as the creative ability to see new possibilities. Imagination is about building bridges to something new, it is about crossing the border to the unknown and about

---

<sup>11</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching*, Nashville 2010, 204.

<sup>12</sup> The article is based on a master thesis, from where an independent argument has been developed. See Ole Vinther, *Imagination and Narratives in Preaching: C. S. Lewis and the rhetorical function of homiletical illustrations in imaginative apologetic sermons*, The Faculty of Theology, University of Oslo (2020).

seeing the unseen. The imagination opens up new possibilities in life.<sup>13</sup> Imagination therefore has the power to make us see and comprehend the Christian faith in a fresh and invigorating way. Through the imagination, Christianity can become true for us.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, images and imagination exert an influence on our identity, our understanding and our actions. Richard L. Eslinger says that, “images become decisive as hermeneutic lenses through which self and world are envisioned.”<sup>15</sup> This in turn is crucial in relation to preaching, because through imagination and narratives preaching plays a role in the shaping of our lives. Eslinger’s homiletical book *Narrative & Imagination* pointedly is subtitled *Preaching the Worlds That Shape Us*. The homiletician David Buttrick likewise points to the power of language when he says that “[b]y naming, we think the world we live.”<sup>16</sup> From this insight follows that preaching is a Christian way of naming and thinking the world in which we live. Buttrick says: “Preaching can rename the world ‘God’s world’ with metaphorical power, and can change identity by incorporating all our stories into ‘God’s story.’ Preaching constructs in consciousness a ‘faith-world’ related to God.”<sup>17</sup> And: “What preaching may do is to build in consciousness a new ‘faith-world’ in which we may live and love!”<sup>18</sup> In a different but related manner, Thomas H. Troeger calls preaching “a way of ‘capturing the imagination’ for God”.<sup>19</sup> Troeger says that “to capture people’s imagination” is “to gain entrance into the way they organize the world.”<sup>20</sup> The preacher therefore is to connect with the landscape of people’s hearts, and at the same time, the preacher is to expand and enlighten this landscape with new meanings coming from the faith.<sup>21</sup> The case here is that Christianity involves a new way of thinking and seeing. “Christian faith is a new way to understand what is *real*,” as Andrew Davison says.<sup>22</sup> In relation to what is called imaginative apologetics, Davison argues that the apologist should present Christianity not only with arguments, but also make “an invitation to ‘taste and see’ what it is like to live

<sup>13</sup> Bård Møland, “Hva skal presten ligned med? Om muligheter og grenser for pastoralteologisk imaginasjon”, in: Halvårsskrift for Praktisk Teologi 27. årg. nr. 1 (2010), 57.

<sup>14</sup> David Hein and Edward Henderson, “Introduction: Faith, reason and imagination”, in: David Hein/Edward Henderson (eds.), *C. S. Lewis and Friends: Faith and the power of imagination*, London 2011, 1–7.

<sup>15</sup> Richard L. Eslinger, *Narrative & Imagination : Preaching the Worlds That Shape Us*, Minneapolis 1995, 141.

<sup>16</sup> David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures*, Philadelphia 1987, 7.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas H. Troeger, *Preaching While The Church Is Under Reconstruction: The Visionary Role of Preachers in a Fragmented World*, Nashville 1999, 141. Cf. Garrett Green, *Imagining God: Theology and the Religious Imagination*, Grand Rapids 1998, 6.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 140–144.

<sup>22</sup> Andrew Davison, “Christian Reason and Christian Community”, in: *Imaginative Apologetics. Theology, Philosophy and the Catholic Tradition*, ed. Andrew Davison, London 2011, 15.

and think differently.”<sup>23</sup> The reason is that imaginative apologetics is an apologetics that focuses not only on the communication of the truth of Christianity, but also on the Christian faith as attractive. Beauty and goodness as well as truth are seen as important, and reason is not reduced to logic, but is seen as also involving history and story, imagination and desire.<sup>24</sup> Alister E. McGrath in his book on narrative apologetics likewise says that apologetics is not primarily about persuading people of the truth of the Christian faith but “about depicting its world of beauty, goodness, and truth faithfully and vividly, so that people will be drawn by the richness and depth of its vision of things.”<sup>25</sup>

To summarise what is said so far, we can say that the imagination is the ability to see how things are or can be, and through preaching and other ways of communicating the Christian faith, the imagination can be formed in a Christian way.

If we now look at imagination in relation to narratives, we can understand them as distinct but related categories. The imagination is the ability to see new possibilities, and narrative is a fundamental form of human understanding through which the imagination can be expressed. We can say that through stories we understand the world.

One way to explore this is through constitutive rhetoric.<sup>26</sup> Constitutive rhetoric takes its cue from Kenneth Burke's stress on identification as the key to understanding rhetoric. According to Burke, there are “ways in which we *spontaneously, intuitively, even unconsciously* persuade ourselves. In forming ideas of our personal identity, we spontaneously identify ourselves with family, nation, political or cultural cause, church, and so on.”<sup>27</sup> Constitutive rhetoric then is focusing on the insight that we identify with and live within specific narratives or conceptions of the world. Maurice Charland calls this “the ontological function of narratives.”<sup>28</sup> The point is that the narratives and the conceptions we live within define and shape our experience of reality. Charland says that to be in a narrative is a “constraint upon the subject's possibilities of being. To be constituted as a subject in a narrative is to be constituted with a history, motives, and a *telos*.”<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, Charland points out that the

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>25</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Narrative Apologetics: Sharing the relevance, joy, and wonder of the Christian faith*, Grand Rapids 2019, 18. See also Paul M. Gould, *Cultural Apologetics: Renewing the Christian Voice, Conscience, and Imagination in a Disenchanted World*, Grand Rapids 2019.

<sup>26</sup> Maurice Charland, “Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the Peuple Québécois”, in: *Quarterly Journal of Speech* vol. 73 no. 2 (1987), 133–150.

<sup>27</sup> Kenneth Burke, “Rhetoric and Poetics”, in: *Language as Symbolic Action. Essays on Life, Literature, and Method*, Berkeley 1966, 301.

<sup>28</sup> Charland (note 26), 138.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 140.

process of identification works in a more subtle way than persuasion. He says that the process “is akin more to one of conversion” in that it “results in an act of recognition of the ‘rightness’ of a discourse and of one’s identity with its reconfigured subject position.”<sup>30</sup> Constitutive rhetoric, thus, is an understanding of the fundamental ways in which language forms identity and experiences.

Another but related understanding is found in narrative rhetoric and the study of rhetorical discourses that “use narrative elements as means to their argumentative, convincing or otherwise motivational ends.”<sup>31</sup> Central to narrative rhetoric is that rhetoric is distinct from and at the same time closely related to poetics. The two books, *Rhetoric* and *Poetics* by Aristotle, established an influential division between two kinds of aesthetic consideration. According to this division, fully invented narratives belong to poetics, while narratives only play a minor role as examples or statements of facts in rhetorical discourse.<sup>32</sup> Walter R. Fisher’s narrative paradigm, nevertheless, which is central and much discussed in the study of narratives in rhetorical discourses, has challenged this understanding. In the narrative paradigm, Fisher calls man *homo narrans*.<sup>33</sup> That is, humans are essentially storytellers that understand the world through stories and not only through logic. For Fisher it is important, that we recognize both *logos*, reason and logic, as well as *mythos*, imagination and narratives. Narration, however, is not merely an element in rhetorical discourse or a specific literary genre. Instead, Fisher argues for what he calls a “narrative rationality”. He explains: “This notion implies that all instances of human communication are imbued with logos and mythos, are constitutive of truth and knowledge, and are rational.”<sup>34</sup> Another place Fisher states that “the narrative paradigm insists, that arguers tell stories and storytellers argue.”<sup>35</sup> *Logos* and *mythos*, in other words, are intertwined in all human communication. Another thing that is important to narrative rationality is how humans make decisions based on “good reasons”. Good reasons, or rationality, Fisher understands in the light of the terms narrative probability and narrative fidelity. He says:

---

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>31</sup> Stefan Iversen, “Narratives in Rhetorical Discourse”, in: The living handbook of narratology, eds. Peter Hühn et al., Hamburg 2014, <http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/narratives-rhetorical-discourse> [accessed 05/21/2019], 1.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>33</sup> Walter R. Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action*, Columbia 1987.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 98.

Rationality is determined by the nature of persons as narrative beings—their inherent awareness of *narrative probability*, what constitutes a coherent story, and their constant habit of testing *narrative fidelity*, whether or not the stories they experience ring true with the stories they know to be true in their lives.<sup>36</sup>

From the human awareness of narrative probability, if a story is coherent, and from the testing of narrative fidelity, if a story rings true with what we already know, it follows that some stories are more compelling than other stories. Therefore: “The world as we know it is a set of stories that must be chosen among in order for us to live life in a process of continual re-creation.”<sup>37</sup> Seen from a Christian point of view the question is whether Christianity can offer a better and more convincing story than other conceptions of life and the world.<sup>38</sup> The argument here is, in short, that humans fundamentally experience life and the world in a narrative way that also, at the same time, is rational. As I see this, *mythos*, imagination and narratives, cannot be separated from *logos*, from reason and logic. At the same time, however, *mythos* cannot be reduced to *logos* and *vice versa*. Imagination and narratives therefore, contribute significantly to human understanding in a way that reason and logic cannot, for *mythos* and *logos* are to be seen as two distinct, though interrelated, modes of experience and knowledge that each provides a unique way of understanding.

If we then look at the concrete rhetorical functions of narratives, we can see that narratives fulfil several functions. Robert Rowland says that narrative acts as a lens and as a way to understand the world. This is the epistemic function of narratives.<sup>39</sup> Another function, according to Rowland, is the persuasive function, and persuasion happens in four ways. First, a credible narrative is a compelling means to get and keep the attention of an audience. Rowland in this relation highlights the perceived credibility of the story, not the truth, as the key in terms of persuasiveness. Second, narratives can create identification between the audience and the narrator or characters in the narrative. Through identification, there can be understanding. Third, narratives can break down barriers to understanding by transporting us to another place or another time. Narratives can rip us out of our own time and culture and place us in another culture, so that we can understand it better. Fourth, narratives can create a strong emotional reaction in a way that a statistical study, for instance, cannot.<sup>40</sup> Another

---

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. McGrath (note 25).

<sup>39</sup> The epistemic function can also be called the ontological function. Cf. Charland (note 26), 138.

<sup>40</sup> Robert Rowland, “The Narrative Perspective”, in: Jim A. Kuypers (ed.), *Rhetorical Criticism: Perspectives in Action*, Lanham 2009, 121–123.

function of narratives, I will point to, is what William G. Kirkwood calls the rhetoric of possibility.<sup>41</sup> According to Kirkwood, narratives have a special ability to open the mind to new possibilities hitherto unknown. The reason for this is found in the distinction between “telling” and “showing”.<sup>42</sup> “Telling” is when things need to be explained, for instance if a rhetor needs to tell what a story means. “Showing” on the other hand is when a story can speak for itself. This happens when a story shows that something is possible, and how it is possible. “Showing” depicts and demonstrates in a way, so that things become conceivable. “Showing” therefore, according to Kirkwood, is the most effective means for the opening of the mind to new and hitherto unsuspected possibilities. Another way to say this, I will suggest, is to say, with the theologian Peter Jonker, that “imagination is the place where change takes place”.<sup>43</sup> With reference to James K. A. Smith, Jonker also says that we are affective and imaginative before we are cognitive, and therefore stories, legends, myths, plays, novels and films come first, and then cognition follows.<sup>44</sup>

As we have seen in this section, it has been argued that imagination and narratives are important for human understanding. Imagination and narratives contribute with an alternative mode of experience, knowledge and understanding, that affects our way of seeing, thinking and acting as well as our identity on a fundamental level. We experience life and the world through stories, and imagination and narratives can, in a special way, show us things and open up new possibilities for us through identification with and understanding of other persons, places and cultures.

### 3. C. S. Lewis on Imagination and Narratives

We now turn the attention to the British scholar, thinker and writer Clive Staples Lewis (1898–1963). C. S. Lewis was a literary critic, literary theorist and intellectual historian; an influential Christian apologist; and a writer of poetry and fiction.<sup>45</sup> C. S. Lewis is, in many ways, an interesting case to examine in relation to imagination and narratives and the communication of the Christian faith. The fundamental reason, however, is that Lewis presented Christianity

---

<sup>41</sup> William G. Kirkwood, “Narrative and the Rhetoric of Possibility”, in: *Communication Monographs* vol. 59 no. 1 (1992), 30–47.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, London 1991.

<sup>43</sup> Peter Jonker, *Preaching in Pictures: Using Images for Sermons that Connect*, Nashville 2015, 13.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 71. See also James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, Grand Rapids 2009, 53.

<sup>45</sup> Eds. Robert MacSwain/Michael Ward, *The Cambridge Companion to C. S. Lewis*, Cambridge 2010; George Sayer, *Jack: A Life of C. S. Lewis*, Wheaton 1994.



with an appeal to both *logos* and *mythos*, reason and logic as well as imagination and narratives, in an original, reflected and thoughtful way.

As a person, C. S. Lewis was one who loved a good argument, and who liked a spirited debate. Rational and logic discussion and arguments were central and natural elements of C. S. Lewis's character.<sup>46</sup> Austin Farrer likewise focuses on the importance of rational arguments for C. S. Lewis, when he describes Lewis as an apologist who argued for the truth of orthodox Christianity.<sup>47</sup> Arguments, however, were not Lewis's only strength. The use of fitting metaphors, analogies and apt illustrations is another key strength. Tandy points out that it is Lewis's melding of reason and imagination that gives his works a unique flavour, as many critics have observed.<sup>48</sup> Clyde S. Kilby for example, attributes Lewis's uniqueness to "a deep and vivid imagination" and "a profoundly analytical mind".<sup>49</sup> Kilby says that these qualities is often seen as opposites, but in Lewis they were joined organically. At the same time there can be seen a development in Lewis's life. In the 1940s, Lewis had relied much on rational apologetics, for instance in the books *Problem of Pain* and *Miracles*, but in the 1950s, he became more comfortable and confident in his use of the imagination and at the same time less argumentative and assertive than earlier.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, when Lewis wrote *The Chronicles of Narnia* it can be seen in a way as a continuation of his rational apologetics, though in a more imaginative form. For whereas Lewis in his rational apologetic works had been arguing for the Christian faith, the aim in his works of fiction was to show imaginatively what Christianity is like, and to give through story an experience of the Christian faith.<sup>51</sup> The case is that although necessary and powerful, rational apologetics has serious disadvantages. In the 1960-essay "The Language of Religion" Lewis says that religious experience can be communicated in two ways.<sup>52</sup> The one way is theological and the other poetic. Lewis explains theological language in the following manner:

In it we are attempting, so far as is possible, to state religious matter in a form more like that we use for scientific matter. This is often necessary, for purposes of instruction,

---

<sup>46</sup> Gary L. Tandy, *The Rhetoric of Certitude: C. S. Lewis's Nonfiction Prose*, Kent 2009, 43–47.

<sup>47</sup> Austin Farrer, "The Christian Apologist", in: *Light on C. S. Lewis*, ed. Jocelyn Gibb, New York 1965, 26.

<sup>48</sup> Tandy (note 46), 51.

<sup>49</sup> Clyde S. Kilby, "The Creative Logician Speaking", in: Carolyn Keefe (ed.), *C. S. Lewis: Speaker & Teacher*, London 1974, 24.

<sup>50</sup> Peter J. Schakel, "C. S. Lewis: Reason, imagination and knowledge", in: David Hein/Edward Henderson (eds.), *C. S. Lewis and Friends. Faith and the power of imagination*, London 2011, 26–30.

<sup>51</sup> Michael Ward, *Planet Narnia: The Seven Heavens in the Imagination of C. S. Lewis*, Oxford 2008, 219–222.

<sup>52</sup> C. S. Lewis, "The Language of Religion", in: Lesley Walmsley (ed.), *C.S. Lewis: Essay Collection and Other Short Pieces*, London 2000, 255–266.

clarification, controversy and the like. But it is not the language religion naturally speaks. We are applying precise, and therefore abstract, terms to what for us is the supreme example of the concrete.<sup>53</sup>

Lewis further elaborates that this entails a great disadvantage for the Christian apologist. For in using abstract theological language the apologist tries “to prove *that* God is in circumstances where we are denied every means of conveying *who* God is.”<sup>54</sup> To describe who God is, Lewis states, we need poetical language. The Christian doctrines are also a kind of poetical statements. It follows that the Christian faith cannot adequately be described in precise scientific theological language. Lewis says: “The very essence of our life as conscious beings, all day and every day, consists of something which cannot be communicated except by hints, similes, metaphors, and the use of those emotions (themselves not very important) which are pointers to it.”<sup>55</sup> Another statement in the essay explains the effect of poetic language as a pointer to something outside the human experience. It is explained this way:

This is the most remarkable of the powers of Poetic language: to convey to us the quality of experiences which we have not had, or perhaps can never have, to use factors within our experience so that they become pointers to something outside our experience – as two or more roads on a map show us where a town that is off the map must lie.<sup>56</sup>

Christianity, thus, according to C. S. Lewis, is in some ways best comprehended indirectly using poetic or metaphoric language, in other words by using the imagination and narratives. This gives imagination and narratives a prominent role along the more rational and argumentative mode in the communication of the Christian faith.

### *3.1 Before something can be either true or false, it must mean*

We will now explore C. S. Lewis’s thinking on imagination and narratives more in detail, in order to get a deeper understanding of why and how imagination and narratives in his view are important for the communication of the Christian faith.

To begin with, C. S. Lewis writes in his autobiography *Surprised by Joy*, published in 1955, that imagination in different ways played an important role in his life.<sup>57</sup> Lewis does not focus

---

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 261.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 265.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 259.

<sup>57</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, London 2012.

on imagination understood as “forming mental images of things not actually present”.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, although he mentions imagination as daydreaming and wish-fulfilling fantasy as well as imagination as invention, the power to create, this is not what interests him. Lewis instead focuses on imagination in another sense, which he calls “the highest sense of all”.<sup>59</sup> When Lewis talks about imagination in this sense, we can make a distinction between two uses or two kinds of imagination, the poetic imagination and the romantic imagination, according to Peter J. Schakel. The poetic imagination is the “organic and intuitive power needed to write poetry (and myth) [...]. It relies on ‘inspiration’ and ‘genius’. It is the mental, but not intellectual, faculty that puts things into surprising and meaningful relationships to form unified wholes.” The romantic imagination on the other hand is a kind of longing or desire that is often aroused by literature or music or experiences of bliss and beauty.<sup>60</sup> This longing, or *Sehnsucht*, Lewis calls Joy, and he describes it as “an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction.”<sup>61</sup>

In *Surprised by Joy* Lewis then describes several instances of his meeting with Joy. One such instance happened when he as a boy in a periodical magazine for the first time read about Wagner’s story *Siegfried and The Twilight of the Gods* and at the same time saw the accompanying illustrations by Arthur Rackham. Lewis in that moment came to feel a strong desire. He says that there arose “almost like a heartbreak, the memory of Joy itself, the knowledge that I had once had what I now lacked for years, that I was returning at last from exile and desert lands to my own country”.<sup>62</sup> This almost rapturous experience soon vanished, but Lewis knew “that to ‘have it again’ was the supreme and only object of desire.”<sup>63</sup> The second instance I shall mention is when Lewis came to read the book *Phantastes* by George MacDonald. Lewis describes how his world in a sense changed while he was reading the book. While other experiences of Joy had reminded him of another world and left the common world momentarily a desert, he now saw “a bright shadow coming out of the book into the real world and resting there, transforming all common things and yet itself unchanged.”<sup>64</sup> It sounds like Lewis had a kind of mystic experience that made him see the world in a new light. This experience was related to Christianity. For, as he proceeds: “That night my imagination was,

---

<sup>58</sup> Schakel (note 50), 15–16.

<sup>59</sup> Lewis (note 57), 15–16.

<sup>60</sup> Schakel (note 50), 16–17.

<sup>61</sup> Lewis (note 57), 18.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 209.

in a certain sense, baptized; the rest of me, not unnaturally, took longer.”<sup>65</sup> When C. S. Lewis says that his imagination in a certain sense had been baptized, by the reading of MacDonald’s *Phantastes*, I think the point is that the story had prepared his mind and imagination to accept Christianity as meaningful and true later in life.

In the preface to *George MacDonald. An Anthology* C. S. Lewis describes the experience of reading MacDonald’s works of fiction in this way: “The quality which had enchanted me in his imaginative works turned out to be the quality of the real universe, the divine, magical, terrifying and ecstatic reality in which we all live.”<sup>66</sup> What had happened was that the fantasy of MacDonald somehow had led Lewis to a deeper and more real view of reality. In Lewis’s view, this is because MacDonald was a master in the mythopoeic art, the art of myth-making. Lewis says that this art may be “one of the greatest arts”, and he describes it in the following manner:

It goes beyond the expression of things we have already felt. It arouses in us sensations we have never had before, never anticipated having, as though we had broken out of our normal mode of consciousness and “possessed joys not promised to our birth”. It gets under our skin, hits us at a level deeper than our thoughts or even our passions, troubles oldest certainties till all questions are re-opened, and in general shocks us more fully awake than we are for most of our lives.<sup>67</sup>

That MacDonald’s *Phantastes* can “shock us more fully awake than we are for most of our lives” may be no coincidence. For, as Alison Milbank writes, George MacDonald was influenced by the German romantic writer Novalis. Milbank explains: “The Romantic project of Novalis and those influenced by him, like the novelist George MacDonald, is to awaken in the reader this feeling of homesickness for the truth. And this, in my view, is the beginning of the apologetic task.”<sup>68</sup> From this follows, that the central feature of fantasy, as here understood, is to lead, in an indirect way, into reality and into the ultimate truth – the truth beyond what can be seen on the surface. Alison Milbank writes: “We need estranging techniques if we are to shock people into engagement with reality, so that they may appreciate the religious sense and we can begin to explain the Christian faith at all.”<sup>69</sup> In the experience of C. S. Lewis it was

---

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> C. S. Lewis, *George MacDonald: An Anthology*, London 1946, 21.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 16–17.

<sup>68</sup> Alison Milbank, “Apologetics and the Imagination: Making Strange”, in: Andrew Davison (ed.), *Imaginative Apologetics: Theology, Philosophy and the Catholic Tradition*, London 2011, 33.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 38.

especially, though not exclusively, imaginative stories that stirred his desire for Joy, and this in the end led him to see, that God was the ultimate object of his longings.<sup>70</sup>

In C. S. Lewis's journey towards faith not only imagination, however, but also reason was important. In the process where Lewis returned to Christianity, reason and imagination acted in a complementary fashion.<sup>71</sup> In 1929 C. S. Lewis had come to believe that "God was God".<sup>72</sup> At this point, however, he was only theist in abstract, impersonal and idealist terms.<sup>73</sup> It was not until September 1931 after a long conversation with J. R. R. Tolkien and Hugo Dyson, on 19–20 September late at night, about metaphor and myth, that C. S. Lewis accepted Christianity.<sup>74</sup> In a letter from 18 October, Lewis explained his friend Arthur Greeves, that he had had difficulties understanding the meaning of the doctrine of Redemption: "What has been holding me back (at any rate for the last year or so) has not been so much a difficulty in believing as a difficulty in knowing what the doctrine *meant*".<sup>75</sup> Lewis could not grasp "in what sense the life and death of Christ 'saved' or 'opened salvation to' the world." However, this changed. Lewis writes:

Now what Dyson and Tolkien showed me was this: that if I met the idea of sacrifice in a Pagan story I didn't mind it at all: again, that if I met the idea of a god sacrificing himself to himself[...] I liked it very much and was mysteriously moved by it [...]. The reason was that in Pagan stories I was prepared to feel the myth as profound and suggestive of meanings beyond my grasp even tho' I could not say in cold prose 'what it meant'.

Now the story of Christ is simply a true myth: a myth working on us in the same way as others, but with this tremendous difference that *it really happened*: and one must be content to accept it in the same way, remembering that it is God's myth where the others are men's myths: i.e. the Pagan stories are God expressing Himself through the minds of poets, using such images as He found there, while Christianity is God expressing Himself through what we call 'real things'. Therefore it is *true*, not in the sense of being a 'description' of God (that no finite mind could take in) but in the sense of being the way in which God chooses to (or can) appear to our faculties.<sup>76</sup>

---

<sup>70</sup> Lewis (note 57).

<sup>71</sup> Schakel (note 50), 21–23.

<sup>72</sup> Lewis (note 57), 266.

<sup>73</sup> Robert MacSwain, "Introduction", in: Robert MacSwain/Michael Ward (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to C. S. Lewis*, Cambridge 2010, 6.

<sup>74</sup> C. S. Lewis, "To Arthur Greeves, 22 September 1931", in: Walter Hooper (ed.), *C. S. Lewis: Collected Letters: Volume 1: Family Letters 1905–1931*, London 2000, 970; C. S. Lewis, "To Arthur Greeves, 1 October 1931", in: *ibid.*, 974.

<sup>75</sup> C. S. Lewis, "To Arthur Greeves, 18 October 1931", in: *ibid.*, 976.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 976–977.

What is crucial here is that Lewis had to understand the meaning of the Christian faith before he could accept Christianity as true. Another thing to notice is that Lewis came to understand the meaning of Christianity, because he saw it related to stories and insights that were meaningful to him. The stories, the myths, that he already knew, opened up Christianity for him, when the meaning of these narratives was transferred to the Christian faith, so to speak.

In the essay “Bluspels and Flalansferes: A Semantic Nightmare”, first published in 1939, C. S. Lewis says: “For me, reason is the natural organ of truth; but imagination is the organ of meaning. Imagination, producing new metaphors or revivifying old, is not the cause of truth, but its condition.”<sup>77</sup> Both reason and imagination thus are seen as distinct as well as necessary and complementary. The role of imagination is to give insight and new understanding through metaphorical language. As Lewis writes: “For all of us there are things which we cannot fully understand at all, but of which we can get a faint inkling by means of metaphor.”<sup>78</sup> And through metaphor, the imagination creates meaning, which is the “antecedent condition both of truth and falsehood”<sup>79</sup> Charlie W. Starr explains that for C. S. Lewis the imagination, as the organ of meaning, gives reason “something to reason about”. However, “[w]hether or not a meaning corresponds to reality (whether or not it is true) is something that must be determined by reason.”<sup>80</sup> Michael Ward summarizes Lewis’s understanding in the following manner: “[R]eason is ‘the natural organ of truth’; imagination is ‘the organ of meaning’ and meaning itself is ‘the antecedent condition of both truth and falsehood’. Imagination is therefore, for Lewis, ‘the prius of truth’: before something can be either true or false, it must mean.”<sup>81</sup> Seen in relation to C. S. Lewis’s conversion to the Christian faith, Ward notes, that “at the decisive moment, it was his imagination that first had to be addressed; it was through his imagination that his reason and, ultimately, his will were transformed.”<sup>82</sup>

---

<sup>77</sup> C. S. Lewis, “Bluspels and Flalansferes: A Semantic Nightmare”, in: Walter Hooper (ed.), *Selected Literary Essays*, Cambridge 1969, 265.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 254.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

<sup>80</sup> Charlie W. Starr, “Meaning, Meanings, and Epistemology in C. S. Lewis”, in: *Mythlore* vol. 25 no. 3/4 (spring/summer) issue 97/98 (2007), 177.

<sup>81</sup> Michael Ward, “The Good Serves the Better and Both the Best: C. S. Lewis on Imagination and Reason in Apologetics”, in: Andrew Davison (ed.), *Imaginative Apologetics. Theology, Philosophy and the Catholic Tradition*, London 2011, 62.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 63–64.

### 3.2 *The first, faint whisper of the wind from beyond the world*

As described above, C. S. Lewis experienced a conversion to the Christian faith where the imagination played a central role. For Lewis however, Christian theology does not owe its attraction alone to its power of arousing and satisfying the imagination. Instead, imagination and narratives, however attractive, are not in themselves enough to settle a case.<sup>83</sup> Fairy tales, fantasy and myth, nevertheless, are important for C. S. Lewis as ways to insight and knowledge. They do have an epistemic function. In the essay “Myth Became Fact”, first published 1944, Lewis looks at the function of myths. Lewis first distinguishes between abstract thinking and experiencing the concrete. He states:

This is our dilemma – either to taste and not to know or to know and not to taste – or, more strictly, to lack one kind of knowledge because we are in an experience or to lack another kind because we are outside it. As thinkers we are cut off from what we think about; as tasting, touching, willing, loving, hating, we do not clearly understand. The more lucidly we think, the more we are cut off: the more deeply we enter into reality, the less we can think. You cannot *study* Pleasure in the moment of the nuptial embrace, nor repentance while repenting, nor analyse the nature of humour while roaring with laughter. But when else can you really know these things?<sup>84</sup>

Lewis then says that myth is the partial solution to this tragic dilemma. For: “In the enjoyment of a great myth we come nearest to experiencing as a concrete what can otherwise be understood only as an abstraction.”<sup>85</sup> In the myth, “what was merely a principle becomes imaginable.”<sup>86</sup> Furthermore: “What flows into you from the myth is not truth but reality (truth is always *about* something, but reality is that *about which* truth is).”<sup>87</sup> This, Lewis says, could also be described in another way. You could say that “myth is the isthmus which connects the peninsular world of thought with that vast continent we really belong to. It is not, like truth, abstract; nor is it, like direct experience, bound to the particular.”<sup>88</sup> Thus, in myth we can experience and know reality in a way, which otherwise is not possible. Starr explains Lewis’s point of view in the following manner: “The myth is a real object of thought, a sub-created, concrete reality, intended not to represent reality outside itself [...], but to be simply what it is,

---

<sup>83</sup> C. S. Lewis, “Is Theology Poetry?”, in: Walmsley (ed.) (note 52), 10–21.

<sup>84</sup> C. S. Lewis, “Myth Became Fact”, in: *ibid.*, 140.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

a pattern of the reality *behind* (not a pattern *about* that reality but an actual taste of the reality itself).<sup>89</sup> It follows that, for Lewis, myths are not only stories, but instead a means through which we can taste reality itself. Another place, in *An Experiment in Criticism*, Lewis describes myths as an encounter with the holy. He writes that a myth conveys an experience, which “is not only grave but awe-inspiring. We feel it to be numinous. It is as if something of great moment had been communicated to us.”<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, in Christianity, in the incarnation, myth becomes an even greater reality. Lewis writes:

The heart of Christianity is a myth which is also a fact. The old myth of the dying God, *without ceasing to be myth*, comes down from the heaven of legend and imagination to the earth of history. It *happens* – at a particular date, in a particular place, followed by definable historical consequences.<sup>91</sup>

In C. S. Lewis’s view, Christianity therefore is unique. Christianity is to be distinguished from other religions and myths. At the same time, however, non-Christian myths can be seen as pointers to Christianity. Lewis says: “We must not be nervous about ‘parallels’ and ‘Pagan Christs’: they *ought* to be there – it would be a stumbling block if they weren’t.”<sup>92</sup> For if, as Lewis says another place, the “Divine light [...] ‘lighteneth every man’.” Then, we should “expect to find in the imagination of great Pagan teachers and myth-makers some glimpse of that theme which we believe to be the very plot of the whole cosmic story – the theme of incarnation, death and rebirth.”<sup>93</sup> The difference between the pagan stories and Christianity is therefore not between falsehood and truth. Instead, it “is the difference between a real event on the one hand and dim dreams or premonitions of that same event on the other.”<sup>94</sup>

The connection between pagan myths and the Christian gospel, as C. S. Lewis sees it, can give us an understanding of why myths, fantasy and fairy tales can in a way lead to the Christian faith. The case is that they are in a sense true. In the essay “On Three Ways of Writing for Children”, from 1952, Lewis writes that a fairy tale arouses in the reader “a longing for he knows not what. It stirs and troubles him (to his life-long enrichment) with the dim sense of something beyond his reach and, far from dulling or emptying the actual world, gives it a new

---

<sup>89</sup> *Starr* (note 80), 176.

<sup>90</sup> C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*, Cambridge 1961, 44.

<sup>91</sup> Lewis, “Myth Became Fact” (note 84), 141.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>93</sup> Lewis, “Is Theology Poetry?” (note 83), 16.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*



dimension of depth.”<sup>95</sup> It follows that the fairy tale is enticing, and it beckons the reader to go forward according to his longing. Although it is unclear what it leads to, the fairy tale, as Lewis understands it, induces in the reader a call for higher things. In a letter to Arthur Greeves, Lewis says that the pagan stories and the romance are a kind of beginnings. They are “the first, faint whisper of the wind from beyond the world – while Christianity is the thing itself”.<sup>96</sup> C. S. Lewis also says, in a letter to Sister Penelope, on the grounds of his own experiences, that “the better elements in mythology can be real *praeparatio evangelica* for peoples who do not yet know whither they are being led.”<sup>97</sup> The *praeparatio evangelica*, the work of pre-evangelism, is also how Lewis saw much of his own work.<sup>98</sup> For instance, Lewis mentions that through literature, a writer can under cover smuggle theology into people’s minds without their knowing it.<sup>99</sup> A similar understanding was behind, when C. S. Lewis wrote *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Lewis’s idea was, as he once explained his friend George Sayer, “to make it easier for children to accept Christianity when they met it later in life. He hoped that they would be vaguely reminded of the somewhat similar stories that they had read and enjoyed years before. ‘I am aiming at a sort of pre-baptism of the child’s imagination.’”<sup>100</sup> In the 1956-essay “Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What’s to Be Said” Lewis likewise explains:

I thought I saw how stories of this kind could steal past a certain inhibition which had paralysed much of my own religion in childhood. [...] [S]upposing that by casting all these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday school associations, one could make them appear in their real potency? Could one not thus steal past those watchful dragons? I thought one could.<sup>101</sup>

A little later he proceeds: “The inhibitions which I hoped my stories would overcome in a child’s mind may exist in a grown-up’s mind too, and may perhaps be overcome by the same means.”<sup>102</sup>

---

<sup>95</sup> C. S. Lewis, “On Three Ways of Writing for Children”, in: Walter Hooper (ed.), *On Stories and Other Essays on Literature*, New York 2017, 57.

<sup>96</sup> C. S. Lewis, “To Arthur Greeves, 8 November 1931”, in: Walter Hooper (ed.), *C. S. Lewis: Collected Letters. Volume II: Books, Broadcasts and War 1931–1949*, London 2004, 12–13.

<sup>97</sup> C. S. Lewis, “To Sister Penelope CSMV, 4 November 1940”, in: *ibid.*, 453.

<sup>98</sup> Joel D. Heck, “Praeparatio Evangelica”, in: Angus J. L. Menuge (ed.), *C. S. Lewis. Lightbearer in the Shadowlands. The Evangelistic Vision of C. S. Lewis*, Wheaton 1997, 235–257.

<sup>99</sup> C. S. Lewis, “To Sister Penelope CSMV, 9 July [August] 1939”, in: Hooper (ed.) (note 96), 262.

<sup>100</sup> Sayer (note 45), 318

<sup>101</sup> C. S. Lewis, “Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What’s to Be Said”, in: Hooper (ed.) (note 95), 70.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 71–72.

### 3.3 Exploring, experiencing and seeing reality and the Christian faith

As we have seen above, C. S. Lewis thought of myths, fantasy and fairy-tales as a way to insight and knowledge and as a means to overcome inhibitions towards the Christian faith. He also said that the mythopoeic art through stories “shocks us more fully awake than we are for most of our lives.”<sup>103</sup> We will now consider how these effects can be achieved, according to C. S. Lewis.

First, Lewis writes in his essay “On Science Fiction” from 1955 that science fiction and fantasy can give “sensations we never had before, and enlarge our conception of the range of possible experience.”<sup>104</sup> Following this statement, Gregory Bassham explains that fantasy has an imagination-expanding function superior to more realist literature. Fantasy broadens our perspective and enlarges our sense of what is possible.<sup>105</sup> Such expanding of the imagination and the consciousness can work through what Colin Manlove calls dislocations to other places or realities, for the purpose of such dislocations are “to stir the characters out of old assumptions into a wider awareness of reality.”<sup>106</sup>

Second, stories can affect the way we see life and our world. In “On Stories”, first published 1947, C. S. Lewis writes that stories appeal because of suspense and excitement. Nevertheless, the quality of the experience is more important. Though some stories may only be about excitement, for Lewis it is the feeling, the sense and the atmosphere in a story that really matters. He says:

To be stories at all they must be series of events: but it must be understood that this series—the *plot*, as we call it—is only really a net whereby to catch something else. The real theme may be, and perhaps usually is, something that has no sequence in it, something other than a process and much more like a state or quality.<sup>107</sup>

Stories are a net to catch something else, Lewis says, and this “something else” is more like a “state or quality” than “series of events”. According to Michael Ward, we can say that Lewis focuses on a story’s atmosphere, the flavour, the smell, the taste or the mood of a story as a

---

<sup>103</sup> Lewis, George MacDonald (note 66), 17.

<sup>104</sup> C. S. Lewis, “On Science Fiction”, in: Hooper (ed.) (note 95), 99.

<sup>105</sup> Gregory Bassham, “Lewis and Tolkien on the Power of the Imagination”, in: David Baggett/Gary R. Habermas/Jerry L. Walls (eds.), *C. S. Lewis as Philosopher: Truth, Goodness and Beauty*, Downers Grove 2008), 246–247.

<sup>106</sup> Colin Manlove, “‘Caught Up into the Larger Pattern’: Images and Narrative Structures in C. S. Lewis’s Fiction”, in: Peter J. Schakel/Charles A. Huttar (eds.), *Word and Story in C. S. Lewis*, Columbia 1991, 263.

<sup>107</sup> C. S. Lewis, “On Stories”, in: Hooper (ed.) (note 95), 25.

kind of indirect method of communication.<sup>108</sup> Important in this connection is that the atmosphere in a story is something to be enjoyed and not primarily contemplated. A story's atmosphere is a way of seeing. To understand what this means we can see what Lewis wrote in the 1945-essay "Meditation in a Toolshed":

I was standing today in the dark toolshed. The sun was shining outside and through the crack at the top of the door there came a sunbeam. From where I stood that beam of light, with the specks of dust floating in it, was the most striking thing in the place. Everything else was almost pitch-black. I was seeing the beam, not seeing things by it.

Then I moved, so that the beam fell on my eyes. Instantly the whole previous picture vanished. I saw no toolshed, and (above all) no beam. Instead I saw, framed in the irregular cranny at the top of the door, green leaves moving on the branches of a tree outside and beyond that, ninety-odd million miles away, the sun. Looking along the beam, and looking at the beam are very different experiences.<sup>109</sup>

Ward explains that "looking along the beam" is enjoyment (personal and inhabited knowledge) while "looking at the beam" is contemplation (abstract, detached and uninvolved knowledge). Ward then contends that the atmosphere of Lewis's stories is a sort of inner meaning, which we are looking along instead of looking at.<sup>110</sup> It follows that stories for Lewis are to be enjoyed as a way of seeing. Furthermore, for Lewis, coming to know God is not like "learning a subject" but like "breathing a new atmosphere".<sup>111</sup> When Lewis tells the Narnian stories he therefore tries to give us a taste and an experience of what belief and Christian faith is. Another way to describe the function of C. S. Lewis's stories is to say that they enable us to get on the inside of faith. Gilbert Meilaender says that Lewis in his stories "offers not abstract propositions for belief but the quality, the feel, of living in the world narrated by the biblical story."<sup>112</sup>

Third, in his writings Lewis often begins with an imaginative description before beginning to argue. "If one looks at the rhetorical strategies informing Lewis's apologetics, one almost always finds that he begins, in the very first paragraph, by immersing the reader in a meaningful situation", says Ward.<sup>113</sup> Related to this, it can be pointed out that Lewis in *The*

---

<sup>108</sup> Ward (note 51).

<sup>109</sup> C. S. Lewis, "Meditation in a Toolshed", in: Walmsley (ed.) (note 52), 607.

<sup>110</sup> Ward (note 51), 17-19.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>112</sup> Gilbert Meilaender, "Theology in Stories: C. S. Lewis and the Narrative Quality of Experience", in: Schakel/Huttar (eds.) (note 196), 155.

<sup>113</sup> Ward (note 81), 72.

*Chronicles of Narnia* uses description in order to create meaning. Donald E. Glover contends that Lewis's descriptions carry the burden of convincing us of the reality of the adventures in Narnia.<sup>114</sup> Furthermore, Lewis's descriptive technique "is the heart of Lewis's technique for touching our deeper imagination."<sup>115</sup> This means that by way of description, Lewis creates meaning. Lewis appeals to the reader's feelings through imaginative descriptions and thus seeks to move and affect the reader.

### 3.4 Summary

To sum up we can say, that for C. S. Lewis, imagination and narratives played an important role in his journey to the Christian faith. Furthermore, Lewis came to see imagination as the organ of meaning. Through his stories, C. S. Lewis sought to expand the imagination and make the reader see, feel and experience in an indirect way what Christianity is like. Lewis intended to create meaning through his stories in order to prepare or pre-evangelise the readers mind to receive and accept the Christian faith. The stories, or the myths, moreover, are seen as ways of experiencing and inhabiting a certain atmosphere or mood or state. These experiences, in turn, are unique ways of experiencing and knowing reality, which cannot be achieved through more abstract ways of thinking and knowing.

## 4. Homiletical Illustrations as an Alternative Mode of Experience, Knowledge and Understanding

Images and narratives in sermons are, or can be, more than simply illustrations, but how are we to understand the communicative power of imagination and narratives in preaching? On the basis of the discussion and exploration above, I will suggest that we can understand homiletical illustrations as being an alternative mode of experience, knowledge and understanding. This alternative mode we can understand in light of the terms *mythos* and *logos*, which can be seen as two distinct modes of experience and knowledge that each provides a unique way of understanding. To understand what this means, let us look closer at some of the insights and understandings found above. Both in the theoretical perspectives on imagination and narratives, and in C. S. Lewis's thinking and practice, we can discern and distinguish two modes of experience, knowledge and understanding, which can be seen as parallel with *mythos* and *logos*. In doing this, it is important to say, however, that the parallels are not seen as being identical with each other. Instead, we can talk of distinct and noticeable family resemblances between different and varied distinctions, and through these varied but parallel distinctions,

<sup>114</sup> Donald E. Glover, *C.S. Lewis: The Art of Enchantment*, Athens, OH 1981, 131–187.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

we can get a more comprehensive understanding of what it entails to see *mythos* and *logos* as distinct and interrelated modes of experience, knowledge and understanding.

First, *mythos*, imagination and narratives, and *logos*, reason and logic, can be related to the distinction between “showing” and “telling”, where “showing” is depiction and “telling” is explanation.<sup>116</sup> In relation to this, it can be pointed out that imagination and narratives, in a special way, can show us things and open up new possibilities for us through identification with and understanding of other persons, places and cultures. Second, a number of distinctions in Lewis’s writings can be related to the distinction between *mythos* and *logos*. The first distinction I will mention here is the one between poetic and theological language. The poetic language, according to Lewis, is the language that religion naturally speaks, and in poetic language, through metaphors, we can convey *who* God is. Scientific or theological language, on the other hand, does not have this ability. Instead, scientific or theological language can be used for instruction, clarification and controversy.<sup>117</sup> Another of Lewis’s distinctions is between “tasting” and “experiencing” the concrete on the one side, and abstract “knowing” and “thinking” on the other. Lewis describes this as two different kinds of knowledge, where we either are “in an experience” or “outside it”.<sup>118</sup> Related to “tasting” and “experiencing”, moreover, are mythic stories, for in myths “we come nearest to experiencing as a concrete what can otherwise be understood only as an abstraction.”<sup>119</sup> Furthermore, in the myth, “what was merely a principle becomes imaginable.”<sup>120</sup> On the one hand, we therefore have myths, or *mythos*, which is a kind of knowing through tasting and experiencing things so that they become imaginable, and, on the other hand, we have abstract thinking, or *logos*, as a kind of knowledge and knowing that is outside or about concrete experiences. Very close to this understanding is the distinction between “looking along the beam”, which is enjoyment (personal and inhabited knowledge), and “looking at the beam”, which is contemplation (abstract, detached and uninvolved knowledge).<sup>121</sup> In addition, it has been said that the stories of C. S. Lewis can be seen as offering “the quality, the feel, of living in the world narrated by the biblical story” instead of giving “abstract propositions for belief”.<sup>122</sup> The argument here is, that imagination and narratives can form and shape experience and understanding in a way that a more abstract thinking cannot. Imagination and narratives contribute significantly to human

---

<sup>116</sup> Kirkwood (note 41); cf. Booth (note 42).

<sup>117</sup> Lewis (note 52).

<sup>118</sup> Lewis (note 84), 140.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>121</sup> Lewis (note 109), 607; Ward (note 51), 17–19.

<sup>122</sup> Meilaender (note 112), 155.

understanding in another way than reason and logic. This is why we can talk of imagination and narratives as an alternative mode of experience, knowledge and understanding. The distinction between *mythos*, the imaginative and narrative mode of communication, and *logos*, the rational and argumentative mode, shows that there are two distinct modes of experience, knowledge and understanding, where the one focuses on identification and understanding through experiences, and the other on persuasion and argumentation through reason and logic. At the same time, however, the two modes of understanding are also interrelated and complementary. We can here use Lewis's understanding of "reason" as the "organ of truth", "imagination" as the "organ of meaning" and "meaning" as the "antecedent condition both of truth and falsehood" as our framework to understand the relation between *mythos* and *logos*.<sup>123</sup> That is, *mythos* alone can lead astray, and *logos* alone is impotent. We therefore need both imagination and narratives as well as reason and logic if we want to communicate in a powerful way. Furthermore, the importance of imagination and narratives in the process of meaning-creation is highlighted, for imagination comes first and then meaning and understanding follows.

As argued above, imagination and narratives contribute significantly to human understanding as an alternative to a more rational and argumentative mode. In line with this view, homiletical illustrations can be seen as an alternative mode of experience and knowledge that in a unique and profound way can contribute significantly to our understanding of the Christian faith. Images and narratives in preaching, are, or can be, more than simply illustrations. Homiletical illustrations therefore, can have more communicative power and a more profound role in preaching than the traditional theory of illustrations has appreciated.

---

Ole Vinther, born 1979, is a pastor in the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Denmark.

E-mail: [ov@km.dk](mailto:ov@km.dk)

---

<sup>123</sup> Cf. Lewis (note 77), 265.