

Midweek Holy Communion in Lent 12 March 2020

## The Screwtape Letters

### Introduction to the Service

In the leaflet to this series 'Lent with C S Lewis, the introduction to today's sermon topic - The Screwtape Letters - states:

*Low cunning from Screwtape, an old devil, to his nephew Wormwood, an apprentice devil, on how to sabotage attempts to lead a Christian life"*

Well, in case you are wondering, I am not proposing to advocate the sabotage of anyone's Christian life.

Rather to highlight, through Screwtape's cunning, how easily we may be misled from our Christian faith.

The Screwtape Letters, intended to be a satire, originally appeared as a series of articles in the Guardian newspaper, between May and November 1941. Such was the interest, that between 1942 and 1944, C S Lewis expanded on some of the themes in a

series of radio talks, which he later published, with additions, in a book "Mere Christianity", which has no doubt been mentioned in this sermon series.

So as we prepare to worship God in this Communion Service, let us focus our thoughts on a verse from II Corinthians 11. 14-15, which reminds us to be on our guard against temptation:

*"Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is not strange if his ministers also disguise themselves as ministers of righteousness".*

**Collect** (BCP 2nd Sunday in Lent)

ALMIGHTY God, who seest that we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves: Keep us both outwardly in our bodies, and inwardly in our souls; that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

**Epistle:** [Ephesians 6. 10-20](#)

**Gospel:** [Luke 4. 1-13](#)

## Sermon

The Screwtape Letters, just 31 in total, were written by Lewis to (and I quote) "throw light from a new angle on the life of men". The Letters are supposedly written by a senior devil, who goes by the name of Screwtape, to his nephew, Wormwood, a junior tempter, who is learning his trade, it seems by trial and error.

Screwtape, is Wormwood's mentor in everything to do with temptation and is helping Wormwood manage the young man he has been allocated, referred to as the Patient. Wormwood is endeavouring to keep him away from finding out about God, who is named 'The Enemy'; and to lure him towards the one he calls 'Our Father below' - Satan.

At the beginning, Wormwood's Patient is not a Christian, but it seems, being drawn towards God, so Wormwood has his work cut out to put a stop to this. Uncle Screwtape cites an example from his own

experience of managing an atheist, who through his reading, was in danger of being drawn towards God. When Screwtape saw what was happenings, he needed to put a stop to the train of thought fast, so planted the suggestion in his mind that it was about time for lunch; followed by the thought that after lunch he could come back with a fresh mind... once lured away from his reading, Screwtape made sure he was distracted by the hustle and bustle of everyday life, until he had forgotten the train of thought which had been leading him towards God.

The sabotage of distraction had been successful in that instance! Screwtape recommends that Wormwood uses similar distractive thoughts with his patient.

Does that ring bells with us, as to how we may be distracted from the thoughts we may have had while reading our Bibles or listening to a sermon?

Wormwood fails in his sabotage, and Screwtape is horrified to learn that Wormwood's patient has

become a Christian. He advises Wormwood to work on the patient's relationships with those around him. In church, for instance, make sure "when he gets to his pew and looks round him he sees just that selection of his neighbours whom he has hitherto avoided...

Provided that any of those neighbours sings out of tune, have boots that squeak, or double chins, or odd clothes, the patient will quite easily believe that their religion must therefore be ridiculous"... Never let him ask what he expected them to look like. Keep everything hazy in his mind now, and ..."never allow him to ask the question:

"If I, being what I am, can consider that I am in some sense a Christian, why should the different vices of those people in the next pew prove that their religion is mere hypocrisy and convention?"

Are we willing to ask such questions of ourselves?

Relationships with the Patient's mother is another area for Wormwood's focus, "Keep his mind on the inner

life, advises Screwtape. "You must bring him to a condition in which he can practise self-examination for an hour without discovering any of those facts about himself which are perfectly clear to anyone who has ever lived in the same house with him or worked in the same office."

Also,

"he will no doubt pray for his mother, but make sure those prayers are very 'spiritual' - that he is always concerned about the state of her soul and not her rheumatism. The advantage will be that his attention will be kept on what he regards as her sins, by which, with a little guidance from you, he can be induced to mean any of her actions which are inconvenient or irritating to himself."

Screwtape then advises Wormwood to work with the devil responsible for the Patient's mother, one called Glucose, so they can encourage their two charges to get up each other's noses. Both will have tones of voice and expressions of face which are almost unendurably irritating to the other. So, says

Screwtape, "bring fully into the consciousness of your Patient that particular lift of his mother's eyebrows, which he learned to dislike in the nursery and let him think how much he dislikes it now. Let him assume that she knows how annoying it is and does it to annoy... and of course, never let him suspect that he has tones and looks which similarly annoy her."

How does that challenge our relationships?

Wormwood is congratulated by Screwtape when his patient makes some new acquaintances - "a middle aged married couple who are rich, smart, superficially intellectual, vaguely pacifist and brightly sceptical about everything in the world." Wormwood has encouraged the relationship, and Screwtape warns him that sooner or later his Patient will realise that his own faith is in direct opposition to the assumptions on which all the conversation of his new friends is based. But as long as said Patient can be persuaded to

postpone any acknowledgement of the fact, he will be in a false position.

"He will be silent when he ought to speak and laugh when he ought to be silent.

Gradually he will assume, first by his manner, but later by his words, all sorts of cynical and sceptical attitudes which are not really his". But, Wormwood, if you play him well, they may become his attitudes too.

Do we have any relationships which are negatively affecting our walk with Christ?

After a while, the Patient develops a dim uneasiness that he is not doing very well in his faith. He is still going to Church, taking Communion and keeping up the external habits of a Christian life, but he is not growing spiritually. Screwtape "Yes, the temptation of a good book, work or sleep is no longer needed to keep him from his prayers; a column of advertisements in yesterday's paper will do.

But you can also make him



- waste his time not only in conversation with people whom he likes, but also those he cares nothing about, on subjects that bore him
- do nothing at all for long periods
- keep him up late at night - staring at a dead fire in a cold room"

What temptations keep us from praying and developing our relationship with God?

Suddenly Screwtape starts a letter with "So! your man is in love".

Indeed the Patient is in love with a young lady from a Christian family and as a result he is getting to know more Christians every day. Screwtape advises that it will be impossible to remove spirituality from his life for quite a while, so instead Wormwood will have to corrupt it, by turning himself into an 'angel of light'.

A reminder to us of the verse of Scripture read at the beginning of the Service:

*"Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.  
So it is not strange if his ministers also disguise  
themselves as ministers of righteousness".*

There is so much more that could be said about these letters, but time does not permit and if any of you wish to read them, I do not wish to spoil your read. However, I think it is important to underline that they were written during the first part of 2nd World War, when life was very uncertain. Currently, our day to day lives have suddenly become unsettled through the the Coronavirus and people are becoming fearful of what might happen. Screwtape addresses that too, suggesting to Wormwood that it would be advantageous to get his Patient thinking about the future, the temporal future, not eternity, and encourage him to think of all sorts of unrealities. This is where anxiety and fear are generated, but also hope that the problems may not happen. If he is looking to the future, then he will not be paying attention to the present and may well become complacent in his

Christian life... and therefore all the more vulnerable to temptation.

Where is our focus at the moment - on what might happen or on Jesus, who has promised never to leave us or forsake us?

The Screwtape Letters can certainly throw light from a new angle on our lives of faith and may challenge our faith in a fresh way. They are well worth reading.

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