

19 March 2020

*'Of all the books...'*

*As a Professor of Literature, widely read in the Classics and European Languages, where did the Bible find its place? Douglas Durand gives this question some thought in the latest of our midweek series of sermons looking at the writing of CS Lewis.*

Collect (BCP 2nd Sunday in Lent)

WE beseech thee, Almighty God, look upon the hearty desires of thy humble servants, and stretch forth the right hand of thy Majesty, to be our defence against all our enemies; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Sermon

'In the beginning was the WORD and the WORD was with GOD and the WORD was GOD' (John 1 v 27). How did CS Lewis, a bigoted atheist, face up to the Word of the Lord, and move from being an outstanding Medieval and Renaissance Professor of English at Cambridge to become one of the most effective Christian apologetic in the last century? He wrote over twenty outstanding Christian books and essays whose roots were firmly in the teaching of the Bible. These books set the Bible alive to us today.

He was born in 1898 in Belfast, the son of a solicitor and of a clergyman's daughter. He was brought up in the prayer and worship of the Church of Ireland. His father loved books and let his son read any of them. Alas, his mother died when he was only ten. He and his brother were distraught by this loss. The boys were sent to England as boarders - where they were miserable. He rejected his Christian religion and withdrew himself from divine protection as a teenager. Then he became enthralled with Wagner and his music and northern European pagan tales. These and imagination about these stories got a hold on him. His love and respect for his widowed father persuaded him to be confirmed as a full member of the Church. He acted the part of being a Christian when he was anything but; but rather living the life of a complete hypocrite. He could never forgive himself for doing this - but happily for him, he was never beyond the forgiveness of Jesus Christ.

And how God intervened in his life! GK Chesterton, a sincere Roman Catholic and essayist, came on the scene. CS Lewis became fascinated on these writings but was very annoyed about Chesterton's interest in the Bible. He was still determined to be an unchangeable atheist. However, Bibles kept being strewn in his path, and Christian literature continually challenged him. One biblical passage hit him hard, in Luke 24 vv 5-6: 'Two angels said to the women on Easter morning, Why do you seek the living among the dead? HE IS NOT HERE!'

This passage and others from the New Testament would not go away. And so Lewis's eyes were opened.

After serving in the horrors of the Great War during 1916-18, he was demobbed in 1919, when he was able to return to the academic quietness as a fellow at Magdalen College Oxford. There he met the great Christian writer JR Tolkien and they became lasting friends. Chesterton gave him a Christian outline of history which made a deep impression on him as it far surpassed any other history he had read.

God now began to close in upon him. God gave him complete choice either to follow him or turn his back upon him. As he rode up Headington Hill in Oxford, Lewis knew that God was giving him the complete choice with no strings attached to decide either to be a Christian or not. Deep down in his heart he knew that he must give his life to God but he did not want to do so. But on that bus Lewis knew that the snowman of paganism was starting to melt as it did much later when the snow began to melt in Narnia! Then in the Trinity Term in 1929 he gave in to God. God was God and he knelt down and prayed. 'Perhaps that night he was the most dejected convert in all England.' God's compulsion is our liberation. Now there was a connection between God and Joy. The final step was taken when he was taken to Whipsnade Zoo on a sunny morning. As he set out on the journey he did NOT believe that Jesus is the Son of God and when they reached the Zoo he DID!

CS Lewis was indeed 'Surprised by Joy'.

His life was turned round by the Bible and the Word of the Lord. The VOICE of Jesus spoke to Lewis just as when he spoke to Saul (Paul) on the Damascus Road. God was now in control. Belief and prayer and going to Church regularly was now a pattern of life. There is only ONE God who is righteous. Paganism had only been the childhood of religion and only a prophetic dream. Where and who is my God? 'That which was from the beginning; by him all things were made' (1 John 1 v 1).

St Augustine of Hippo wrote this: 'The Christian religion existed among the ancients and has never failed from the beginning of the human race until Christ came in the flesh, when true religion which was already in existence began to be called Christianity.'

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. There is no such thing as 'post-Christianity'. I close with what I believe is a crucial part of Lent. We remember that Jesus said to Satan the Deceiver: 'Man shall not live by bread alone but by every Word which shall proceed out of the mouth of God.' Let us take this to heart. The Bible tells us that the kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ. Amen. (Revelation 11 v 15). It is precisely this Power that we all need to overcome the Coronavirus.

In the name of God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Douglas Durand