

## Lent with C S Lewis

**26/03/20: 'The Mapmakers'**

**Ivan Bailey**

### Prologue

*(Pre-service talk)*

It was when C S Lewis talked of maps and mapmakers that my thoughts turned to two great men of the sea: both from Norfolk and neither of them Horatio Nelson. Jonathan Raban was brought up in Hempton near Fakenham, where his father was the Vicar, in the years following the Second World War. He went on to become an ocean ranging traveller and a world renowned Award-winning author. He is a man who clearly understands the many moods of the sea and its fierce complexions and who seeks to plumb its deepest meanings. He engages even the most hardened landlubber like me with an unparalleled literary skill. He now lives in Seattle, high on the West coast of America near the Canadian border. It was from there in 1996 that he set out on a single-handed voyage a thousand miles northwards to the Alaskan capital of Juneau. He took what was known as the Inside Passage, sailing between Vancouver Island and the Canadian coast.

He was following in the wake of the man who gave his name to the Island, George Vancouver. He was born in 1758 in Kings Lynn, the son of a customs official. He was only 13 when he joined the crew of round the world explorer Captain Cook. In 1792 he arrived as captain of

his own ship *Discovery* with an attendant craft at the southern entrance to the Inside Passage. He was a rigid disciplinarian who neither gave nor received affection from his crew. They did, however, have unqualified respect for his absolute professionalism as one of the truly great navigators. His command of terrestrial measurements and bearings, his mastery of the night sky and astronomy, and his fast-moving mathematical brain was such that 200 years on Jonathan Raban could find him a reliable companion. Armed with Vancouver's journals, low wooded hills and deer forests, distant snow capped mountains, steep-sided fjords, islands and inlets, lagoons and rapids, and beguiling and deceptive channels all appeared at the point of the map where Vancouver had placed them when he first set eyes upon them centuries before.

And how does this help our topic for today? We shall see - I hope...

## Sermon: The Making of Maps

When in 1942 C S Lewis began his famous series of broadcast talks that eventually emerged as his best-selling *Mere Christianity* he was concerned not simply to encourage believers but also to engage with non-believers. He did so by asking everyone to draw upon their own personal experience and ask questions. It seemed to be natural that everyone, no matter who they were, had a basic sense of what was fair or unfair, of what is right or wrong. And the measure of agreement between people across the world and across the ages was more than you might think. No one however always obeyed their best instincts. It was something that operated from within. If folk are conscious of a universal law might it not suggest a universal Lawgiver and, that our minds are geared to a greater Mind which is that of God. So it was after some years of this kind of thinking that Lewis was sitting on a bus going up Headington hill out of Oxford when it suddenly clicked. God was God. He did exist. Although he began attending College Chapel, reading his Bible and saying his prayers, it was only first base. What of Jesus? More arduous reflection followed with a key intervention from JRR Tolkien of Hobbit fame before he resolved that question. That click came one day when his brother 'Warnie' drove him as a passenger in his motorcycle sidecar from Oxford to Whipsnade Zoo. He did not believe it when he set out but when he arrived he was totally convinced. Jesus was the Son of God.

Lewis will have nothing to do with the idea that Jesus was a great, or arguably the greatest, moral teacher of all time, and that if we followed his advice we would all

lead happier lives in a better society. This he argued could also be said of other famous moral teachers, Plato, Aristotle, Confucius and the rest. But if we cannot keep up with say their lesser requirements how are we to cope with Jesus' harder demands? The real truth is that Jesus is just different from all other men and women of morality. Jesus is God.

The Christian creeds describe Jesus relationship with God as 'begotten not made'. To beget is to bring into being someone like yourself - in the case of humans another person. The range of creatures from ardvaaaks to zebras will result in more ardvaaaks and zebras. On the other hand a motor mechanic can take bits and pieces of different sorts and create a motor cycle. When one creates one brings together other things to make something else. This is what God the Father did when he *created* the world. When He *begat* Jesus only God could be the outcome. This is what Jesus claimed to be: 'I and the Father are one.

Lewis argued that there are only three responses that can be made to such a claim. One: that person is a lunatic, akin to a man who believes he is a poached egg. Two: even worse that person is not mad but bad. Three: the claim is true. Critics have argued that these options do not take into account outsiders' objections that Jesus could well have been a great moral teacher whose followers got it wrong and erected their own superstructure around him. It was a fanciful account of how after he was killed they met him again and that he established a community in which people somehow found God inside them enabling them to do things they could not do before. But this is all territory that has

been well and truly covered. The Nicene Creed which we say at the Holy Communion Service was agreed at a great Council of Christian leaders and scholars in the Greek city of Nicea in 325. It is this creed which speaks of Jesus as 'begotten not made.' The Creed was the result of some 300 years of prayerful biblical reflection, intense theological study and philosophical enquiry. Every facet pertaining to Jesus and his mission was explored. The Creed represents the conclusions they came to about the heart of Christian belief.

So now what of my early enthusiasm for two Norfolk mariners? We know that in 1792 Captain George Vancouver arrived to explore new territory, the sea between the southern end of Vancouver Island a thee mainline coast of Canada, a thousand miles north to Alaska. His survey was thorough and exhaustive and impeccable in its accuracy - to the extent that many years later Jonathan Raban could rely on the integrity of his charts in making a safe voyage. They have, however, been confirmed by all others who have sailed these seas in the intervening 200 years and those who have followed after Jonathan Raban. This is not op say that nothing has been added to the sum of nautical knowledge or that modern insights and techniques cannot be more revealing. Vancouver was considered something of a genius that with a sextant and his quicksilver mathematics he could establish his ship's position in as little as two or three minutes. In this satellite age with a GPS system any navigator on any ocean in any storm can discover his precise location within two or three seconds. However *natural developments aside the fact is: the sea and all that belongs beneath it and around it remains the same.*

As generations of sailors have crossed and re-crossed Captain Van's trails and found him reliable so over the last 1700 years even more people in every age and generation have retraced the definitive explorations of the of the early Church Fathers at Nicea and found them essentially sound and consistent with their today's world. Yes, people do come up with new, or as each generation sees it, 'modern' approaches to Christ, but they all too often turn out to be to be rehashes of old ideas which have already been found not to work. This is not to say that each age and century has not contributed genuine new knowledge which sets everything else in another perspective. This is especially true in our own day when scientific expansion and the ramifications of computers and their technological versatility leave us breathless - at least us lesser oldies who can 'only stand and stare.' What does emerge is that God as Creator comes across as yet more and more amazing each succeeding day. The real question, however, is, not what does this new knowledge say about Jesus: but what does Jesus say to this new knowledge. It is only through His insight. direction and power that it can remain uncorrupted and be translated into blessings for all men and women. Without Him evil enters in and adds to the store of the world's misery. It is for this reason that the Church must passionately preach the Gospel to all people.

Our Sunday morning recital of the creed from Nicea finds us saying something highly unusual. God is described as being three but at the same time one: Father Son and Holy Ghost, three Persons but one God. There is some rum spiritual mathematics going on here

where it would seem that we need some very rare person, the like of Captain Van, to transpose his skills and sort it all out. But C S Lewis shows how it can be revealed quite simply as a natural part of our everyday experience, and shows the source of the vital motive power that Vancouver found in obliging winds, and Jonathan Raban in the healthy throb of his ship's engine.

## *A Reading*

An ordinary simple Christian kneels down to say his prayers. He is trying to get in touch with God. But if he is a Christian he knows that what is prompting him to pray is also God: God so to speak inside him. But he also knows that all his real knowledge of God comes through Christ, the Man who was God - that Christ is standing beside him, helping him to pray, praying for him. You see what is happening. God is the thing beyond the whole universe to which he is praying - the goal he's trying to reach. God is also the thing inside him which is pushing him on - the motive power. God is also the road or bridge along which he is being pushed to that goal. So that the whole threefold life of that three-personal Being is actually going on in that ordinary little bedroom where an ordinary man is saying his prayers. The man is being caught up into the higher kind of life - what I call Zoe or spiritual life: he is being pulled into God by God while remaining himself.

## *Mere Christianity: The Three Personal God*

In his earthly life Jesus' own seamanship would see him guide a fishing boat across the Lake of Galilee to its chosen place. Yet he could also show himself as the master of deep and raging elemental forces: 'even the winds and seas obey Him.' As an insidious virus threatens and we look into an unknown future beset by fear so let us trust and journey with Him. There is no place where He has not gone before. There is no better Captain. Praise the Lord. *Bon voyage.*