

St Andrew's Eaton 'Virtual Sermons'

Saturday 11 April 2020

**With C S Lewis on Holy Saturday -
'A Story for the Day in Between'**

by Canon Ivan Bailey



'a church for all - a place for you'

THE LION, THE WITCH AND THE WARDROBE was the first of the seven books written by Clive Staples Lewis that make up his Chronicles of Narnia. It is this one that contains the greatest story ever told. This is an extravagant claim to make, even for a work that has sold in its millions worldwide over the last seventy years, and which, along with its companion volumes, has been adapted for stage, screen and every technological expression our age allows. But when all is said and done it is only a story for children written by a middle-aged bachelor shortly after the end of the Second World War and which bears all the hallmarks of a society with a mindset sharply at variance with ours today.

Although he had no children of his own C S Lewis well knew how to beguile his young audience. He is a favourite uncle quietly conspiring with them against the adult world. 'Grown-ups will say, but...' or - that if grown-ups knew all that he could tell them they would not let them read it. Children know adventures clearly lie ahead. The story begins when Lucy, Edmund, Peter and Susan are evacuated from London when the wartime air raids began. They arrive at a large rambling house in the depths of the countryside, owned by an amiable old professor who leaves them entirely free to explore wherever their curiosity might take them. It rained! So the children turned their attention to the myriad of rooms, corridors, staircases and attics, all replete with very old books, pictures, harps and other curios, draperies and interesting old furnishings. It was Lucy who discovered a room containing only a single large wardrobe. She opened the door and pushed through the soft folds of the coats inside and - suddenly - to her great surprise she found herself in the middle of a wood at night time sharing an umbrella with a friendly fawn who escorted her to his cosy little cave. Here he put down his parcels, put on the kettle, and sat her in a comfy chair and gave her the most delicious tea. He told her she had found her way into the icy kingdom of Narnia which was under the thumb of a great White Witch who made it

always winter but where Christmas never came. Very bravely as it happens, he sees Lucy back to the point for returning home through the wardrobe.

The other children had not noticed her absence and refused to believe her, particularly her brother Edmund who is a rather nasty piece of work. But it is he who next inadvertently passes through the wardrobe into Narnia's ice and snow. He hears the sound of bells and turns to see a reindeer drawing a sleigh driven by a fat dwarf. Raised up behind him sat a great lady, very tall and severe, clad in white fur to the throat, wearing a golden crown and holding a golden wand. She upbraids Edmund for not recognising her as Queen of Narnia but invites him up to sit beside her and generously plies him with irresistible helpings of Turkish Delight. She points out her castle and extracts a promise that Edmund will bring his brother and two sisters to her when he next comes to Narnia.

When all four children eventually return to Narnia together Lucy leads the way to the faun's little house where they find it totally destroyed and notice to say that Mr Tumnus had been taken away by the secret police. A friendly robin leads them to a pair of wonderful beavers whom Mr Tumnus, fearing the worst, had alerted to look out for them. In a beehive style home above a frozen dam with smoke curling from it Mrs Beaver puts away her sewing machine, turns to her stove and in the best traditions of Mole and Ratty and *The Wind in the Willows* all the enjoy a sumptuous meal. (If you are tempted to ask why this fantasy for Holy Week, C S Lewis will not let you down.) Seated in his armchair Mr Beaver updates the situation, and then remarks:

‘They say Aslan is on the move - perhaps has already landed.’ Now none of the children had ever heard of him before but at the mention of his name they suddenly felt quite different.

‘Is he a man?’ asked Lucy.

‘No,’ said Mr Beaver, ‘He is the King of the Wood and Son of the great Emperor-Beyond-the-Sea. Aslan is a lion - the lion, the *great Lion*. Word has come we are to take you to see him at the Stone Table.’

Suddenly the children noticed Edmund had slipped away. They knew his only destination could have been the Witch’s castle, where incidentally he was to find the once friendly Queen wickedly furious that he had not brought Lucy, Susan and Peter with him. Their presence threatened her kingdom and for his treachery Edmund must die. But back to Mr Beaver. He urged they set out immediately before the Witches foul agents arrived to seize them. Her favourite punishment was turning people into stone. But then as by secret ways and hidden trails he led them across the icy, snow- laden land something very curious happened. The Sun rose higher in the sky, and newly melted water rattled through the brooks, flowers appeared, birds sang amid branches newly adorned with leaves. Aslan was indeed abroad. At last they came to a great green space overlooking great forests all around with the glint of the sea on a far horizon. There stood the Stone Table, a great grey slab raised on four smaller stones. And there in the midst of a throng of the many and varied creatures that peopled Narnia stood Aslan, the great Lion, magnetic and majestic, with flowing mane and bronzed body latent with power. He looked on them with large deep overwhelming eyes. The children were at first very afraid but his rich deep voice received them kindly and he listened as they asked if he could release Edmund from the Witch and save his life. The reply was, ‘Yes but it would not be easy.’

Later Aslan is seen from afar talking alone with the Witch. He then leaves her and enters the forest. Lucy and Susan fall in behind at a discreet distance but Aslan turns, ‘Do follow. Yes, I will be glad of your company tonight.’ The Lion is strangely

sad and deeply troubled, his footsteps leaden and reluctant. The great head droops, desolate with an unknowable agony. At the Stone Table the Witch awaits with her cruel and horrid horde of fiendish creatures and abominable spirits. As the Lion appears, at the Witches command, they seize him with a cackling glee. He does not resist as they roll him over, and bind him with cords that dig deep into his flesh. They lift him on to the great stone table where they further shame him by shaving his great coat and uttering demeaning insults. Lucy and Susan watch in horror. But miss the moment when the Witch's knife falls and Aslan lies dead.

When all have left Lucy and Susan cross to kiss the cold face, lovingly stroking what remained of his beautiful fur, all the time, crying till they could weep no more. It was as the sun was first rising streaking the dawn with light they looked to see the Stone Table had been broken in two by a great crack. They then heard a familiar voice and turned to see a shining resplendent Aslan, more glorious than before. Aslan had surrendered his life so that Edward could live. Aslan explained that although the Witch knew the Deep Magic there was a deeper magic from before Time began that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor's stead the Table would crack and death itself would start working backwards. Aslan told the girls to get on his back for the most exhilarating ride that ever was. Lucy and Susan held on, tight as the great beast took to the air, soaring over mountain and valley, river and lake, straight to the Witch's castle. There in the great courtyard were many many statues of all the people the evil Witch had turned to stone. As the Lion's breath fell upon them they were joyously restored to life. But now the Lion was going through every room in the castle and then down into even the deepest dungeons. There now appeared a new glorious exultant living multitude which happily included a certain Mr Tumnus.

A Christian reading it for the first time would recognise as a story that he or she already knew. The land of Narnia ever beset by snow is our very own world captive to sin and the menace of the Devil. The Lion is Jesus the great Deliverer. As Lucy and Susan follow Aslan's lonely journey to the Stone Table, here are all the marks of Gethsemane and the Cross, the submission of the unresisting victim to humiliation, mockery and death. In Lucy and Susan we see the women who watched with him as he died, the women who came to anoint his body and thereby became the first witnesses to his Resurrection. But here too in the Lion's furious ride is the Lord's descent into Hell that is our wondering focus on this Holy Saturday when Our Lord is releasing from the Devil's deepest and darkest place souls who had gone before. The Harrowing of Hell was a key feature of the Mediaeval Mystery Plays that Lewis knew so well. As the actors towed their wagons around the town presenting the Easter drama and engaging the popular crowd their appeal was not via the intellect but through the imagination.

Lewis' appeal to the intellect is found in *Mere Christianity*: but he believed the imagination offered something more. He is saying in effect - supposing we take this story and place in another kind of world, in another time, or even out of time, what insights might enrich our understanding of the actual story that we know to be true. The implications are vast and many are too clever for me.

But the key is Aslan.

Although C S Lewis chose the Turkish word for lion, Aslan is most certainly the Lion of Judah, a description of Christ from the Book of Revelation. At the very first mention of his name by Mr Beaver the children, without knowing who he was felt a jolt to the heart and fear. No one, according to Mrs Beaver could appear before Aslan without their knees knocking. When the children finally met the mighty beast there was

kindly graciousness. Yet the children realised that something could be good and terrible at the same time. Terrible paws, thought Lucy, if he did not know how to velvet them. The first impact might be the necessary awareness of awe and holy fear. We rightly think of Jesus walking with us as a friend, inviting us to use the most intimate name for father as we call on God. But it can all become a bit too casual. The Almighty becomes the All-Matey, not the one before whom sinners trembling stand to seek his mercy. As Mr Beaver said; 'He is not a tame lion, he is wild. Jesus is not there for us to domesticate for our own particular ends. Jesus is powerfully free to take his own way and to take us with him on his terms. It may be akin to the thrilling ride of Lucy and Susan on the broad back of Aslan to demolish the Witch's domain. Let C S Lewis continue to lead us on to picture and to ponder, and as we do so deepening our awareness and insight of the Saviour and His purpose.

We were careful to say at the outset - not that *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* was the greatest story ever told - but that it *contained* the greatest story ever told. But what of the millions who have not recognised its basis in Jesus' great work of salvation. Well. Millions of seeds have been sown. And as on the Day Between, this Holy Saturday and the Harrowing of Hell, there is no place and no human heart beyond the reach of Christ, the Lion of Judah.

Canon Ivan Bailey



St Andrew's
Eaton, Norwich

'a church for all - a place for you'

www.standrewseaton.org.uk