

Sunday 15/1/12

CS Lewis

Opening remarks

Since being asked to prepare this talk I have been thinking about visiting preachers. I note they always say how nice it is to be here, they also thank the congregation for asking them.

That's prompted two thoughts. First, I am pretty sure you didn't ask. Secondly, it's really quite daunting here despite, as they say, being several feet above contradiction.

But we seem to be stuck with each other so let's agree to make the best of it!

Introduction

As you may have seen, my subject is CS Lewis, a professor, an almost lifelong bachelor, a writer and a Christian.

I want to tell you a little about him, his apparently conventional life, an unlikely hero perhaps.

I want to explain why he has been important to me.

Clive Staples Lewis

Was born in 1898 in Belfast

He had a difficult childhood. His mother died when he was ten and he had a troubled relationship with his father. He was sent to a variety of boarding schools, one of which he referred to much later as Belsen.

He was a clever young man, with a thirst for knowledge, a natural understanding of language and a fascination for myth and legend.

He won a scholarship to Oxford in 1917 but later that year, at the age of 19, Second Lieutenant Lewis went to fight in Flanders where he was seriously wounded. It seems that his fading religious faith was lost as a result of his wartime experiences. Returning to Oxford, he obtained a First Class degree and made an academic career.

Conversion

A most important part of Lewis' life in Oxford was a group of about six like-minded men. The group, called The Inklings, were jointly founded by Lewis, and his great friend JRR Tolkien, Professor of Anglo-Saxon and author of "The Lord of the Rings". The Inklings had weekly meetings in Lewis's rooms, and later, in a pub, the Eagle and Child, (known as the Bird and Baby). They discussed literature, each others' books, religion or whatever took their fancy.

Lewis (known as Jack to his friends and family, was astonished that intelligent and sophisticated

people could suffer the mental aberration of being a Christian as so many of his friends were.

That Tolkien was a devout and convinced Roman Catholic was the most difficult reality to come to terms with. Lewis struggled to understand. It was a productive struggle, lasting some years, in conversations with his friends – especially Tolkien. Finally, at the age of 36, he came to faith. He resisted strongly, writing later that he was brought like a prodigal, "kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance to escape".

Afterwards he continued to battle with doubt, writing to a friend some years later "How could I - I of all people – ever have come to believe this cock and bull story!" As someone often assailed with doubt, I find this quote remarkably re-assuring.

The Author

It was following his conversion that his writing career began to flourish.

He wrote some scholarly books on literature but is best known for his other works, all of which relate to his Christian faith. Most notable amongst these are the seven books in The Chronicles of Narnia starting with the Lion, the Witch and The Wardrobe. The series was one of the most successful children's literary series ever published. The stories are often described as religious allegory; but Lewis said they were "supposals", that is how God might have chosen to save a completely different world through the sacrifice of his Son.

The power of these stories is in putting over Christian ideas of good and evil, love and forgiveness, justice and mercy, in an implicit way, to the children who have enjoyed the stories for their own sake.

Lewis also wrote three science fiction novels, set in turn on Mars, Venus and finally on Earth. All are about the battle between good and evil, with Earth the home of a rebel spiritual power. Lewis describes them as modern fairytales for grown-ups.

The Apologist

So Lewis had become an orthodox Anglican and a Christian apologist.

An apologist is not someone who keeps on saying "Sorry" but someone who makes a reasoned argument in defence of an idea, in this case the Christian faith.

Lewis, perhaps because of his previous atheism, was an outstanding apologist, sometimes called "The Apostle to the Sceptics."

During the 2nd World War Lewis became a popular broadcaster. Some of his talks became the basis of his book "Mere Christianity". By "mere", Lewis meant the beliefs common to nearly all Christians rather than the controversies that divide the denominations. He writes for ordinary people, not academics and experts. He presents relatively complex ideas in an easy going style.

I found this book when I was in my early teens. In it, Lewis took me on a journey through arguments starting from what ordinary people instinctively feel is right or wrong, towards a conclusion that God exists, and that only God can satisfy human craving. He concludes that Christ's claims must be taken seriously. Here is a short extract from his argument.

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: They say 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God.'

*That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic – on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg – or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the **Son of God**, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronising nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.*

Significance to me

Why was this book so important to me? I was a teenager, starting an education in science, at school where faith was not common or popular, where science was thought to have discredited belief. I needed to know that to believe was not unintelligent, not a mental aberration, to be reassured that there are very good arguments in favour of Christian faith. My enthusiasm at the time was such that I suggested to my Vicar that Lewis had proved the existence of God. He gently doubted my certainty, and suggested that God had not arranged for things to be so cut and dried and I now know that Lewis's arguments can be challenged. But that does not trouble me because in the end I am not looking for proof, not expecting that the human mind can pin God down. But I wanted to know that I did not have to choose between blind belief and atheism, that doubts can be addressed without disloyalty, that whilst human reason, – to use Solomon's words – is inadequate to comprehend the will of God, it is nevertheless God given.

Bishop Tom Wright, wrote "a lot of people have become Christians through reading Lewis and, though, like me, they may have gone on to think things through in ways he didn't, they retain, like me, a massive and glorious indebtedness."

A simple faith is great if it is truthful. However I believe we should be honest to God, not hide the things that trouble us but face them, humbly using all the resources God gives us, including our minds. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. Jack Lewis has helped me, and many others, and as such he is a sort of unlikely hero of mine.

The End and Lewis's Legacy

You may know of Brian Sibley's book "Shadowlands"; published in 1985, later made into a play and a film. This gives an account of Lewis's surprising marriage, at the age of 57, to Joy Gresham in 1956 and her tragic illness leading to her death in 1960.

Three years after Joy's death, Lewis died in Oxford on 22nd November 1963. Many people remember that day but did not know about Lewis's death; it was the day that another Jack died, the day President Kennedy was assassinated.

After a period of some obscurity following his death CS Lewis seems now to be beginning to be rediscovered. The Narnia books have been the subject of a series of films and TV adaptations and a new biography is about to be published.

Perhaps more people, perhaps you, will be encouraged to read CS Lewis, who is feisty and lyrical, funny and moving, full of brilliant images, a splendid read with the power to nurture faith.

Gordon Hunt

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