

C.S.Lewis – Heroes of faith 17.3.24 10.00am St Marys, Woodbridge.

As I get my breath looking out at so many of you I have met in past lives can I ask you where you were on 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1963? If you are too young please ask an older member of the congregation what happened on that day sixty years ago?...../

Can I start by thanking Father Nigel for the opportunity of sharing some thoughts with you this morning and the joy I found in taking down so many half remembered books from my study shelves? It has been a real treat to work out why I am so grateful to an academic who lived in a completely different world. Jack Lewis experienced a very lonely Edwardian childhood, terrible boarding schools, he became a soldier in the trenches, a carer for his dead comrade's mother for forty years and a man who found lasting fame for a set of children's books. Like Rowan Williams, one of Lewis greatest fans, I regret never having read 'The Lion, the witch and the wardrobe ' in childhood.

On 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1963 a quiet, kind History teacher came running out of the staffroom in my Devon prep school yelling 'they have shot the President'. Jack Kennedy was dead and a string of political assassinations, riots and preparations for war started in the states. In Oxford a Cambridge professor specialising in medieval literature died the same day. He had been in poor health for some time .

Clive Staples Lewis was never a national treasure and when he died in 1963 there were few obituaries, and those there were dammed his memory with faint praise. Time magazine described him as 'one of the church's minor prophets with an unfashionable orthodoxy set against the heresies of his time.'

As a teenager in the sixties my concerns centred on girls, doubt in the certainties of the past, folk music, quiet pacifism, protest, Vietnam and the third world. C.S. Lewis had little to say on these issues. Few read Lewis and he was not popular with Bishops, theologians or evangelical preachers. At university my hall had a library so I read Screwtape, Mere Christianity, Surprised by joy and the four loves. These books popular three decades before made sense in a way contemporary Christian literature with rational

arguments for belief did not .Lewis ability to deal with difficult issues through narrative and imagination reminds both Rowen Williams and myself that the approach can be closer to scripture than is rational systematising .

My Christian union at college refused my request to stock these books = didn't he have dodgy views on the miracles? And wasn't his lifestyle a bit odd – marrying a divorced woman , smoking his pipe like a chimney , a friend of Roman Catholics and drinking beer every day . What use is fantasy to well-meaning Christians went the reasoning?

It may be true that every dog has his day and if you look back on the best seller lists of the 1950s most authors are long forgotten. I am standing here because many of Lewis books are still in print , a biography or two appear every year, my children loved Narnia, my first grandchild is having the Lion the witch and the wardrobe read to her and my son named his cat after Puddle gum , a Marsh wiggle . Yes sitting at the Vet my wife gets the call for Marsh wiggle Herbert to come forward for her vaccinations .If you ever come to see me to talk about your loss I may lend you the book Lewis wrote after losing his wife to cancer, 'A grief observed 'Writing these notes I had to remind myself that I was not writing a eulogy but some thoughts approaching a sermon. I would like to concentrate on joy,myth,Narnia and the pain of loss, issues C.S. Lewis helped me with in the hope that you will take him down from the shelf, share his ideas with your grandchildren or pop into' the Bird and baby' the next time you are in Oxford ..

In Mere Christianity and surprised by Joy Lewis recounts how he got on a bus to Heading ton and during that journey he changed from not believing to belief in God. The history of his conversion experience is complex with adolescent conversion to atheism, growing conversion to belief, long walks with friends, attendance at an Anglican church and finally the acceptance the divinity of Jesus. Lewis saw his conversion to Christ as the active and assertive nature of God seeking him out. He described himself as the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England. In Lewis description of a painful process he puts God in a very active role .Looking back he teased amiable agnostics as talking about 'man's search for God 'In Lewis understanding this is like talking about the mouse's search for the cat. .

Of course Lewis had been open to other friends and their ideas but in many ways the most important friend for us was JR Tolkien. For many who do not believe Christianity is, and always, was at best a myth, one of many myths you can chose to believe in. By myth Lewis and Tolkein did not mean fairy stories but ways men and women have sought to perceive deeper truth. For any atheist faith is merly wish fulfilment. For the sceptic the idea of God is a consolation for life's pain and failure .Faith is merely a consoling story for the inadequate and the needy. This attack on Christian orthodoxy was and remains very threatening to many who believe.

Both C.S. Lewis and J.R.Tolkein loved imagination and the stories that make sense of a deeper reality. Up to that point the fundamental alternative Christian apologists had appealed to reason .Tolkien helped Lewis to grasp imagination, story and myth in the significance of Christ. In Lewis words' the story of Christ is simply a true myth, working in the same way as the other myths but with one tremendous difference – it really happened.

The use of myth and imagination to present the truth of scripture can lead to misunderstandings and doubt, particularly with those who only accept literal interpretations. But myth is one reason Lewis is important to younger generations and their acceptance of deeper truth in fantasy, imagination and myth. And of course the American association with Tolkien helped Catholics, Episcopalians and Evangelicals to adopt Lewis as their own, discovering the attraction of his creative way of thinking.

Lewis created his own fantasy world in seven novels he wrote for children. As Rowan Williams explained you can read the Narnia novels thinking of seven rooms in a house. Go beyond that and see that the rooms have windows looking out on a landscape. Read the Narnia novels with a child and they may ask you deeper questions about faith and your own beliefs. The central character Aslan is both powerful and so attractive that children get the ideas of sacrifice and resurrection. In these novels Lewis contrasts the emptiness of human nature with a yearning and wistfulness to be with the Christ figure Aslan. The death and resurrection of the lion is particularly well written.

Lewis has his critics but his writing makes people think and to feel. We can think we know what faith is but Lewis offers to help us with the experience of surrender in the face of absolute incarnate love. His description of joy is worth tasting .

I have spoken of joy, myth, Narnia and belief but as I get older the greatest gift Lewis left us is his own discovery of human love. Late in life he married a divorced New Yorker Joy Gresham. After intense pain he experienced suffering and loss. Some of you will remember seeing the film version of this story Shadowlands ( Anthony Hopkins and Deborah Winger 1994) but for me his own account ,A grief observed ' is the most important description of the feeling of loss I have ever read . It is an unrestrained account of Lewis feelings and has been a great help to many who felt //,like him that doubt and feelings can be so overwhelming. The book starts with the brutally honest statement 'No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear'. (x2)

I have never found Lewis anything other than honest, engaging and struggling with truth as we all do. His description of the ways in which suffering and loss tests our faith is very real. Like the writer of the psalms Lewis plumbs the depth of despair and starts to come up and recover a sense of balance. The process is very painful and simply reading,'A grief observed 'can be very challenging. I have heard Lewis prayer in the face of a loved one suffering, 'If only I could bear it, or the worst of it, of any of it, instead of her '

I recommend Lewis to you, not as a hero, but as a friend who has struggled with faith, struggled with doubt and experienced great joy . A man of sorrow and acquainted with grief.

If like the Greeks in our gospel passage this morning, 'You would like to see Jesus 'Surprised by joy and Mere Christianity are good starting points. If you like being with your children or grandchildren talk through the ideas they find reading the Narnia novels Whatever you do enjoy C.S.Lewis as a friend a wise fellow traveller and a man who struggled with doubt and loss.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

