

“Ye were sometime darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord. Walk as children of light, for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness and righteousness and truth.” (Ephesians 5)

It is difficult to open a paper or journal these days without seeing rants from fundamentalist Christians against Harry Potter or the Narnia Chronicles of C. S. Lewis or Tolkien’s Ring Cycle.

The fundamentalists concentrate on the imaginative inventions of these authors, on wizards and elves, magic spells and dragons, talking animals and waling trees, and condemn them as being anti-Christian, against the message of the Bible.

They counsel parents not to allow their children to see such movies or to read such books.

But what these Bible-bashers have failed to realize is that such works of imagination all show the great cosmic battles between good and evil. And in every one of them good wins out. But not without much suffering, and the greatest suffering of all is the spirit of self-sacrifice and love which inspires the heroes.

In other words, Tolkien, C.S. Lewis and J.K. Rowling and many other writers are presenting in fantastic and imaginative forms the old, old story of Jesus and his love (I promised not sing that last line!)

The first chapter of St John’s Gospel, our Last Gospel at most Masses, says of Jesus, the Word of God: “In him was life, and the life was the light of men....That was the true light which lighteneth every man that cometh into the world.” *All* men, *all* human beings of every age are given light by the Logos, the Word of God. Not just Christians, but *all* men. This is the voice of conscience and the awareness of good and evil that is in us all.

The Church has always taught that knowledge of God is possible for all men through the use of their God-given reason. This is based on St Paul’s letter to the Romans, where he says: “There is no respect of persons with God....For when the Gentiles, who have not the law, (that is, the Torah revealed by God

to the Jews), do by nature the things contained in the law, these....show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness”

God revealed himself to the Jews by a special revelation of the covenant through Moses, when they received the Ten Commandments and the rest of the Torah, but long before that he had revealed himself to all mankind in the covenant with Noah, when he swore that never again would he send the flood. The sign of that covenant between God and all humanity was the rainbow. The writer James Baldwin was referring to that covenant when he wrote the lines:

God gave Noah the rainbow sign;
No more water, the fire next time!”

Of course the Church has always taught that God’s full and definitive revelation of himself and his nature of love was given in Jesus Christ. In the Hebrew prophets and in the Greek poets there were gleams of light and partial grasping of truth, but the full light of the glory of God shone forth in the face of Jesus Christ and in him only, the final, total revelation of God.

This is where that seemingly narrow and hard saying of Our Lord’s comes from. Jesus said:” I am the way, the truth and the life; no man cometh unto the Father but by me”. Fundamentalists use this saying to assert that it means that only Christians will be saved into eternal life, that all but true Christian believers will perish eternally, that only those who explicitly confess Jesus Christ to be the way to God can be saved.

But this is to deny the whole message of Jesus as more than the man who lived thirty-three years in Palestine. As we have already noted, St John’s Gospel in particular portrays Jesus as the eternal Logos, the very Word of God from all eternity and the light of God for all men.

This means that those who do not have the particular revelation of the Word of God in the Torah, or the particular revelation of the Word of God made flesh in the man Jesus Christ may nevertheless attain salvation and eternal life with the God who made them by following the light of the highest ideals of their conscience and the natural revelation of God in goodness, mercy and love.

Needless to say, my beloved George MacDonald has a word to say on this. The original is in the Scots dialect from his book “Robert Falconer”, but I’ll be merciful and put it into standard English. I should also add that the Brahmin friend in this extract is not a resident of Boston, but a high caste Indian!

“The more the words of Jesus come into me” the doctor began again, “the surer I am of seeing my old Brahmin friend, Robert. It’s true I thought his religion not only begun but ended inside him. It was all about bowing down before and aspiring to the bosom of the infinite God. I don’t mean to say the he was not honourable to those about him. And I never saw in him much of that pride that belongs to the Brahmin. It was rather a stately kindness than that condescension which is the vice of Christians...The first commandment was all he knew. He loved God – not a God like Jesus Christ, but the God he knew – and that was all he could. The second commandment – that glorious recognition of the divine in humanity, making it fit and needful to be loved, that claim of God upon and for his own children, that love of the neighbour as yourself – he did not know. Still, there was religion in him; and he who died for the sins of the whole world has surely been revealed to him long before now, and through the knowledge of him, he now dwells in that God after whom he aspired”

You see, MacDonald is not denying that it will be through Jesus Christ that the Brahmin will be saved, but he is maintaining that Jesus died for that Brahmin and will reveal himself fully to him, if not in this life, then in the next. He is saying that the man who has lived up to the highest ideals of natural law and natural reason, who has done good where he could, who has loved his family, who has followed the light of his conscience, is in a fit state to receive the full light of the glory of God when it is shown him.

Sadly, the opposite is true also. The person who has stifled the voice of his conscience, has lived selfishly for himself alone, who has brought grief, not joy, to those around him, who has embraced evil, even though he might declare himself a Christian and be baptized, confirmed and even ordained, will be in a wretched state when the light of God in Christ is turned fully on him in the life to come. That man will experience the light not as beauty and clarity beyond all human joy, but as a burning, searing, Hellish torment.

Here in the midst of Lent, we should redouble our efforts to live as children of light, showing the fruits of the Spirit, which St Paul lists in his letter to the Galatians as “love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith,

meekness, temperance”, or in our epistle today as “goodness, righteousness and truth”.

All I have said is directed against the bigotry of fundamentalism, whether it be the Bibliolatry of the Southern Baptists or the Catholic fundamentalism of the Lefevrists, whether it be the fundamentalism of Jews or the fundamentalism of Muslims. The light of Christ is for all mankind. We who have received what we believe to be the fullest revelation of God in Jesus Christ must be very careful to acknowledge that this is not an exclusive privilege for the elite, but rather an unspeakable gift for us to share with all mankind.

I want you to pay particular attention to the last hymn we shall sing at the end of today’s Mass. My own stumbling attempts to display the scope of the love of God in Jesus Christ, the light of the world, pale into insignificance compared with the words of Fr Faber’s hymn:

There’s a wideness in God’s mercy,
Like the wideness of the sea,
There’s a kindness in his justice,
Which is more than liberty

There is grace enough for thousands
Of new worlds as great as this;
There is room for fresh creations
In that upper home of bliss.

For the love of God is broader
Than the measure of man’s mind;
And the heart of the Eternal
Is most wonderfully kind

But we make his love too narrow
By false limits of our own,
And we magnify his strictness
With a zeal he will not own.

If our love were but more simple,
We should take him at his word;

And our lives would be all sunshine
In the sweetness of our Lord.

May our lives be filled with the light of the Son of God, the light of the world, the light that shines in darkness and is not overcome by that darkness. May we, like St John the Baptist, bear witness to Jesus Christ, the light that lighteneth all men, (even when it involves his Cross), so that all men through him may believe. And what are all men to believe? That the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. Then all men will behold his glory, the glory as of the only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. No wonder, after the last Gospel every Sunday, all we can say is “Thanks be to God”.

Fr. Gordon Reid