

Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Readings: [Hebrews 5.1-10](#)

Twenty-first Sunday after Trinity

20 October 2024

Next year will be the 75th anniversary of the publishing of C S Lewis's 'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe.' It coincides with 1700th anniversary of the Nicene creed. An interesting juxtaposition. C S Lewis created this fantastical story of a mystical land called Narnia, accidentally discovered by some children through a door in the back of a wardrobe. Here animals speak and they tell of an evil queen that has taken over. It is always winter and never Christmas in Narnia. The true King, Aslan, will return one day and wrong will be put to right. On discovering that Aslan is a Lion the children are somewhat fearful. The story unravels...

C S Lewis wrote it for his god-daughter. She was no longer a child when he finished it so he wrote a delightful note saying that 'some day you will be old enough to start reading fairy tales again.' I read it in my 20's at one sitting. It is both enchanting and powerful. A reimagining of the Christian story with Aslan as the compelling 'Christ' figure.

The letter to the Hebrews is not in any way like the Narnia stories but the writer (we know not whom) is telling the story of the Christ in a way that attempts to grasp the imagination of early Christians in their context. They are familiar with Jewish theology, the Greek language and being persecuted and martyred for practising their faith in Jesus.

The writer begins with the words, **long ago**. Unusual. This was an ancient story even two thousand years ago. And it concerns God, not a god from the pantheon of gods in the ancient world but the God of everything. This is the God who communicated through dreams and some very unexpected people. The God who gathered a people to bless all the peoples of the earth. They tell stories about God's approachability, goodness and mercy and the struggles that they have trying to be faithful to this faithful God. In their articulation of faith and God no stone is unturned and trying to understand this God's ways when the innocent suffer is a constant debate.

Now this story has stepped up to another level.

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son. God has addressed us in flesh and blood. People have seen him, spoken to him, had arguments with him, touched him – he's just like us they say.

And decades after his appearance they are still trying to put it all together. The writer of Hebrews says that this Son was there before time and life began, in fact he created time and life and he still nurtures it into being. And the whole created order will one day return to him. It is his inheritance. The writer says, if you want to know what God is like, indeed God's exact likeness, look at this Son, hear his words, see his actions. Come close to this shining glory! But, this 'Son' he claims, is also the one **true, authentic and representative human being.** (Tom Wright) If you want to know what humanity is at its best, here it is. And we are his brothers and sisters.

In today's text the writer takes us somewhere that for 21st century westerners is quite alien. The world of the Jewish 'high-priest' who offers the sacrifice for sin on behalf of all his people. The High Priest is both a liturgical and pastoral role, therefore, one with us in our weakness. Except the offering this high priest makes is himself, both priest and victim, opening the sluice gate of divine mercy and grace to irrigate life. His pain and suffering and total identification with dark side of humanity is redemptive. A suffering with eternal consequences.

Then the writer adds some great storytelling, introducing the wonderfully named, Melchizedek. This mystical character from Genesis whose name means King of Righteousness was not only High priest but king of Salem, King of Peace. His was a divine appointment, not an inherited human appointment. It was therefore superior, a different order entirely. The writer explores this further in Ch 7 and proclaims that Jesus too is of this order. A priest for ever, according to the order of Melchizedek.

Can you see what the writer to Hebrews is trying to do here?

These Christians are under serious, life-threatening pressure. The writer is trying to tell the story in such a way that they are grasped by the person at the heart of it all. This is theological re-enchantment. A re-enchantment that reimagines life itself. Christ is the greatest gift that we have to offer.

In the discussion about the state of Christianity in the West we seem to invest quite a bit of time talking about the church, seeking to address the understandable concern about the loss of congregational numbers. We have become an anxious church. Clergy feel stressed by the pressure to grow congregations. Lay leaders fear for the future of churches that they have been part of for years. I wonder, in all the concern, whether there is one thing that would help us more than anything and that is being re-enchanted by our faith story and the person at the heart of it. Maybe together we would be more confident and less fearful.

In the work that we have been doing here on visitor welcome we have been asked a question. How does your building tell the central story of the Christian faith? Not the stories of the great and good but THE story. How can a visitor pick up who is the focus of this sacred space? I suggest that the interplay of the dominance of light, Christian symbols, the idea of Cathedral, the patronage of All Saints, the music and liturgy and faith stories, both past and present, all tell the story. In some ways this building reflects Rilke's lovely phrase, 'God, you have such a quiet way of being.' It does not overwhelm. But it does awaken curiosity and move the heart. Was C S Lewis suggesting that all church buildings are like the wardrobe?! A door onto another, greater story? A 'resonant space' as the Bishop of Chelmsford has put it where with anticipation "we can listen afresh to one another and to God". The creative insights of artists, musicians, writers and preachers can stoke the wonder of faith but this story belongs to all of us - the 'Christ in you, the hope of glory.'

In her poem, 'The Airy Christ,' based on St Mark's gospel Stevie Smith describes a saviour who will not harass or browbeat anyone, rather 'he only wishes they would hear him sing.' In this and every eucharist we rehearse and receive his story, presence, gift and song. Can you hear it?

The Very Revd Jerry Lepine