

Mere Christianity and the Unsafe Jesus

Thomas Robinson, November 17, 2013

Matthew 10:34-40

- ³⁴ “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth.
I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.
- ³⁵ For I have come to set a man against his father,
and a daughter against her mother,
and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.
- ³⁶ And a person’s enemies will be those of his own household.
- ³⁷ Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me,
and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.
- ³⁸ And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.
- ³⁹ Whoever finds his life will lose it,
and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.
- ⁴⁰ Whoever receives you receives me,
and whoever receives me receives him who sent me.”

C. S. Lewis – On God’s Work in Prayer (from *Mere Christianity*)

An ordinary simple Christian kneels down to say his prayers. He is trying to get into touch with God. But if he is a Christian he knows that what is prompting him to pray is also God: God, so to speak, inside him. But he also knows that all his real knowledge of God comes through Christ, the Man who was God—that Christ is standing beside him, helping him to pray, praying for him. You see what is happening. God is the thing to which he is praying—the goal he is trying to reach. God is also the thing inside him which is pushing him on—the motive power. God is also the road or bridge along which he is being pushed to that goal. So that the whole threefold life of the three-personal Being is actually going on in that ordinary little bedroom where an ordinary man is saying his prayers. The man is being caught up into the higher kinds of life—what I called *Zoe* or spiritual life: he is being pulled into God, by God, while still remaining himself.

On Temptation (from *C. S. Lewis’s Letters*)

I think one may be quite rid of the old haunting suspicion—which raises its head in every temptation—that there is something else than God – some other country . . . into which He forbids us to trespass – some kind of delight which He “doesn’t appreciate” or just chooses to forbid, but which would be real delight if only we were allowed to get it. The thing just isn’t there. Whatever we desire is either what God is trying to give us as quickly as He can, or else a false picture of what He is trying to give us – a false picture which would not attract us for a moment if we saw the real thing. Therefore God does really in a sense contain evil – i.e., contains what is the real motive power behind all our evil desires. He knows what we want, even in our vilest acts: He is longing to give it to us. He is not looking on from the outside at some new “taste” or “separate desire of our own.” Only because He has laid up real goods for us to desire are we able to go wrong by snatching at them in greedy, misdirected ways. The truth is that evil is not a real thing at all, like God. It is simply good spoiled. That is why I say there can be good without evil, but no evil without good. You know what the biologists mean by a parasite – an animal that lives on another animal. Evil is a parasite. It is there only because good is there for it to spoil and confuse.

November 22, 1963 – 50 years later

For people near my age, it's a day like 9-11-2001. I can remember exactly where I was standing when I heard that President Kennedy was shot – in a building that no longer exists on the Abilene Christian College campus where I was a freshman. I can still see the tears of Walter Cronkite, still hear the drums of the funeral cortege. It was the real beginning of the '60s. Just 1 hour earlier in Oxford England another death that I didn't know. Clive Staples 'Jack' Lewis, just short of his 65th birthday. (Also Aldous Huxley in CA – *Brave New World*). I think I only learned of Lewis later that school year when assigned to read his book *Mere Christianity*. It is impossible to calculate the impact of lives. Kennedy's death. What if? Viet Nam, Turmoil. So also I think few would have expected C. S. Lewis to be so influential in a new millennium. I certainly had no idea at that time of the impact he would have on my own life and thought.

The Resistant Convert

Lewis was born in northern Ireland, son of a Welsh father who was a lawyer. His mother died of cancer when he was 9. In his early teens at boarding school he rejected Christianity, full of fear and failure. He became a conscious atheist (till his 30's) fascinated with mythology. Accepted at Oxford Univ., but was in WW I trenches Nov 22, 1917 (19th birthday). Wounded in 1918. Completed Oxford (triple 'first' in Gk&Latin Lit, Philosophy, and English Lit.) Teacher at Oxford till 1954, then at Cambridge Univ. till 1963 as prof of Medieval and Renaissance Lit.

Through a long process (*Surprised by Joy*) he came to believe in God (1929) and became a Christian in 1931 under the influence of J.R.R. Tolkien and others. Lewis's strong atheism resisted, till he felt God undermining all his intellectual and emotional defenses.

Lewis always had edges as a believer. He became a wholehearted Christian (Ch. of England) but he & friends met in pubs for conversation. He had no use for inerrancy or penal substitution. But he always sought ways to express the reality of Christian faith in ordinary language.

He became a public figure in 1941-44 (wartime) when he gave a series of BBC radio talks that became *Mere Christianity* and wrote the *Screwtape Letters* in weekly newspaper installments. He is now perhaps best known for the children's books *Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-56). But many other books and scholarship along the way. Space trilogy, *The Great Divorce*, etc.

The Living God and the Unsafe Jesus

For Lewis, the only reason to believe in Christianity was because it was true – not for comfort, uplift, culture, or anything else. The relationship with God is real and personal. So many 'modern' forms of religion seek an abstract god who is distant and undemanding, a god we seek but who does not seek us. God never leaves us as is, but turns us into his children.

Jesus comes into our life as a guest who takes over. In Narnia Jesus is portrayed as the great Lion Aslan, the great king of Narnia. When the children first learn he is a lion, they ask, "Is he safe?" "Safe?" said Mr. Beaver, "Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you." That experience of real encounter, out of our control, with the living God, known in Jesus, is the great power that makes Lewis's writings continue alive.

Logic, Poetry, Myth, and Joy

He expressed in logical argument, story, and poetic imagery the reality of the biblical revelation of the supernatural (true myth) that makes sense of everything and breathes beauty and life.

One should never stop with C. S. Lewis. I have many arguments with him over specific issues. But reading Lewis always feeds your mind and heart with new ways to imagine the truth of God.