



Sermon: - 11th March 2018

The Power of Love

Numbers 21: 4-9; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

What do JK Rowling and CS Lewis have in common? One answer is that they are both known by their initials rather than their first names. Another is that they both wrote children's books which are also enjoyed by adults. That's not such a big thing to have in common, lots of children's books are also enjoyed by adults. But there is something significant about these children's books that makes them special. The books have a decidedly Christian message! If you're familiar with the Narnia books or even the films then that might not surprise you.

The character of Aslan is quite clearly meant to represent Jesus. His death at the hands of the evil White Witch who has taken over Narnia and then his subsequent resurrection leads to the defeat of the White Witch and the salvation of Narnia. However, if you know anything about the Harry Potter books, or even if you don't, you might not be aware of the extent to which the Christian message permeates the books. The single most important thing about the Harry Potter books is the power of self-sacrificial love to beat the power of evil. In Narnia, Aslan goes willingly to his death out of love for the land and its people and it is because he goes willingly, an innocent victim – he has done no wrong - that he is raised from death and defeats the White Witch.

In the Harry Potter books Harry's mum, Lily, sacrifices herself to save her son, and in so doing, gives him protection against the evil Lord Voldemort which means that Voldemort, however hard he tries, cannot kill Harry. This protection later enables Harry to offer himself as a willing sacrifice to Voldemort, and in so doing he gives his friends and his whole community the same protection against the power of the evil Lord. From the opening pages of Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone to the closing pages of Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows we see one sacrifice after another, made out of love and in a free choice, all leading to the defeat of evil in the closing pages of the series. In the end, Harry is redeemed by his mother's sacrifice, and protected by the sacrifices of others, while the whole community is saved by Harry's willingness to sacrifice himself for his friends.

As Rowling puts it in the last book, "Harry understood at last that he was not supposed to survive. His job was to walk calmly into Death's welcoming arms." In doing this, Harry ensured that the evil

Lord Voldemort too would perish, and the wizarding world would be saved from a great evil. The parallels with the gospel are clear. As one theologian puts it, “Jesus goes forth to confront evil but does not destroy it. On the contrary, it destroys him. But he overcomes it by the power of his love and death.”

In both the Harry Potter books and the Chronicles of Narnia we see the saving power of love when it is willing to sacrifice itself for the greater good. Perhaps one of the reasons for the popularity of these books is this sense of hope that they give us, that evil can be defeated. Of course, as Christians, we know that it has been defeated.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” This is, so it is said, everyone’s favourite Bible verse. And of course, it speaks of this same self-sacrificial love offered as that offered by Aslan, and by Lily Potter in fiction, offered by Jesus in historical fact, for the salvation of the world. The power of love is that, love that is prepared to sacrifice itself on behalf of others has power beyond the power of evil to destroy it, and power to save those who are on the receiving end of that love. The self-sacrificial love of Jesus is offered to us for our salvation, turning tragedy into triumph, turning vulnerability into victory. This is a popular idea in fantasy fiction, but not so popular in the world we inhabit. Vulnerability and self-sacrifice is not something that we want to choose. We prefer security to vulnerability and comfort to self-sacrifice. That is the lesson the world teaches us. But the gospel message is different. It teaches us that the way to victory and security is through vulnerability and self-sacrifice.

Martin Luther, the Reformation theologian, called this verse, “the Gospel in a nutshell.” But I believe that to really understand this verse we have to read verse 17 as well. “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” The primary purpose was salvation, not judgement. In other words, God is fundamentally a God of love. God is first and foremost a God of love. Love trumps everything. Not just evil, everything, even justice. If you think that’s not true, then think of the parable of the workers in the vineyard. Those who came at the beginning of the day were paid a denarius for a day’s work. Those who came at the end of the day were paid a denarius for their work. Those who came at the beginning of the day complained. The owner of the vineyard said, basically, “it’s my vineyard and my money and I choose to be generous.” That’s not justice, it’s mercy, as Paul reminds us in Ephesians. It’s not justice, but it is love, and it’s what God does.

He gives us a gift of love and of salvation, but it's not always a welcome gift. In the course of the Harry Potter books Harry is kept alive by the sacrifices of others. Always he protests against their sacrifice. At the end, he says "I don't want anyone else dying for me." Because when someone dies for you it creates a debt.

And this brings us to an issue raised by this passage that I think we often forget. God loves us, but that makes demands on us and we don't always like it. A friend of mine told me a story about bedtime encounter he'd had with his son, who was 6 the time. Upset that his father was putting him to bed earlier than he wanted to go, Benny said, "Daddy, I hate you." His dad replied, "I'm sorry you feel that way, but I love you." Benny said, "Don't say that!" His dad said, "I'm sorry, but it's true. I love you." "Don't," his son protested, "Don't say that again!" At which point his father said, "son, I love you...like it or not!" Benny couldn't cope with the fact that his father loved him, even when he was telling his dad that he hated him. He tried to manipulate his dad into letting him stay up later by telling him he hated him. In his 6-year-old mind he probably thought that his dad would let him stay later so that he would love his Dad again. His dad wasn't playing that game.

God didn't ask us if we wanted to be saved. He just did it. And in doing it he created a claim on us. Think of the claim a person – any person – would have on us once they've saved our life, let alone died doing it. Think of the debt people feel they owe in such circumstances. Jesus has saved our life, and in the face of such love, such sacrifice, we must surrender all of our claims. But he didn't ask us if we wanted to be saved. Perhaps if he'd asked us we would have said, "no thank you, I don't want to be in debt to you." Perhaps like Harry we would have rather suffered on our own behalf, been independent, made our own mistakes and suffered the consequences. But in the face of God's love, his sacrificial love, we, like little Benny, are powerless. We might choose to run away from his love, we may choose to accept it or not accept it, but we can't control it, or limit it, or manipulate it. And what verse 17 tells us is that this love is for the whole world. Jesus came into this world, not to condemn it, but to save it. Love is the most important thing, God's love for us, which we cannot change. Which, even in rejecting it, we cannot change. It is an indiscriminate love, a love which we can barely understand. A love which exists above and beyond our efforts to evade or avoid the consequences.

And this is very good news. Because what that means is that no matter what we do we cannot prevent God loving us. No matter what we do he will carry on regardless, loving, accepting, wanting us to be in a relationship with him. No matter how hard we try to run away, he is waiting, longing for us to come back. And that is truth for the world. Jesus came into the world, not to

condemn it, but to save it. That is the message we take out of these doors. It doesn't matter who you are or what you've done, God loves you. This is the grace of which Paul speaks in Ephesians, "because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions." Not justice, mercy. It doesn't matter who you are or what you've done, God loves you...