

# The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe

## *War*

The first thing to realise about this famous children's story is that its largest context is the Second World War. For children reading the book today, perhaps only their grandparents will have had the four children's experience of being evacuated and will remember the reasons why that had to happen. Otherwise, it will be a matter of placing the book in the context of history lessons. The background of war however, is important for understanding the language of battle and the military references. In the world of adults, war means death and terrible destruction. The children of this story might ultimately go home to find their families decimated by casualties. What sense can be made of such destruction and inhumanity? In the land of Narnia, such actions can be turned into meaningfulness, redemption, reconciliation and healing.

## *Wisdom*

The evacuation of the children takes them into the world of the unfamiliar. All children encounter such transitions: going to school, staying away from home for the first time, going to hospital. Here, the transition is given as a journey of exploration and adventure. The house they go to is full of possibility. However, what is particularly important is the permission-giving of the Professor. He does not shut down the children's spirit of adventure, enquiry and thirst for new knowledge and experience, but encourages them to look around, affirms their extraordinary experience and gives them guidance on how to interpret it. He encourages the children to share their story and to develop its full potential. He is an adult, but one who has deep sympathy with the world of the child. He does not try to control it, but can help them to explore it most effectively.

## *Wardrobe*

The place of transition, the unexpected entry into the new, other world emerges from *play*. It is because the children, like any children, are playing hide and seek together, that the discovery that the world is *more* than it seems is made. The story of the transition is very remarkable. Lucy does not *escape* from this world (Lewis says several times that you should not shut yourself in [or out]). The world of the house is perfectly apparent and recognisable, but the new world is revealed to her not as a magical or mystical experience, but as an extension of our own reality perfectly accessible to the senses. So Lucy feels the furs, hears the crunching of the snow, feels the cold, and the tree branches. Analogy passes into reality, - what is *like* a tree branch is revealed as an actual tree branch. The fur coats, which belong to the house but which can be taken into Narnia, are also worthy of comment. Unfashionable it may be nowadays to wear real fur, but in this story, the fur represents a first inkling of the living warm fur of Aslan, a joyful tactile experience which cements their unity with Aslan and their allegiance to him. So when the children put on the coats to keep them warm against the cold of Narnia, they 'put on' Aslan, even though they do not yet know him, much as St Paul talks about 'clothing oneself with Christ' (Gal 3.27).

## *Winter*

The children encounter Narnia as a country where evil currently has its sway, just as a world torn by war would feel. The presence of evil is externalised into the surroundings. Everything is cold and frozen. Living creatures have been turned to statues. Sinful behaviour (for which the White Witch exacts a price) brings with it numbness and apathy and in particular, the inability to act, to energise, to make a difference. A world in the grip of this kind of evil is incapable of transformation. It is, significantly, a place where Christmas never comes. Only the Incarnation of God's divine love can bring the energy to turn this kind of winter into spring. Again, Lewis turns aside from the metaphysical vision to the physical elements of sense experience. Spring has colours and forms and sights and smells directly accessible to the human senses and evidence of fundamental metaphysical change.

#### *Hospitality and relationship*

Although Narnia is in thrall to the White Witch, Lewis shows that the formation of relationship and the offering of hospitality lie at the heart of change. Mr Tumnus is in trouble as soon as he offers Lucy hospitality and a relationship free of self-interest or vested interest in his own well being. Giving of himself means sacrificing himself, but in doing so, the evil of Narnia is challenged. Conversely, Edmund is cut off from relationship with his siblings. Evil results in loss of relationship, loneliness and terrible isolation, as dreadful as being sent to Coventry, or refusing to speak to your best friend out of pride after a silly argument. On another level, the hospitality of the Beavers helps prepare for the encounter with Aslan, - their befriending and kindness is the 'evangelising' process for the children. This then grows to embrace all other creatures, until there is a redeemed community. As in many children's stories, animals can talk, but in this story, exchange and discourse is necessary to show how all creation must be redeemed and to demonstrate the important responsibility human beings have in God's purpose for the creation. Exploration of the creation also reveals guides and signs and symbols which Lewis evokes from Christian typology and collapses back into forms which fit into the Narnia landscape: a robin, a white stag, a lamppost as guiding light.

#### *Truth, temptation and Lies*

Truth telling is examined carefully in this story. For instance, Lucy has a truth to tell about her encounter with Mr Tumnus, but the truth is not backed up by physical evidence, - the back of the wardrobe proves solid ('blessed are those who have not seen, yet who have come to believe' John 20.29), so there is the question of how to tell others of a truth they have not yet experienced, and what happens to your own feelings when that truth is rejected. The Professor is especially wise on this point and urges the children to think beyond their presuppositions and assumptions about what must or must not be true.

There is also the matter of confession of truth, and the giving of forgiveness, as Mr Tumnus tells Lucy first one story then another. Evil distorts and conceals the truth, and causes pain and misery. Children can identify with the cold fear that goes with telling lies, getting stuck in a lie and then not being able to find a way out of it again. So we also sympathise with Edmund as he is sucked, through greed and temptation, into the White Witch's clutches, condemned to lies and duplicity and ultimately betrayal. So Edmund undergoes suffering as he (literally) has to fight his way out of his life of lies and betrayal and overcome the evil which seduced him.

### *Aslan*

Aslan is a lion, the king of the beasts. The name of Aslan is sufficient to stir the children's spiritual senses 'like the first signs of spring, like good news', even before they have actually encountered him. His power and strength are apparent, but to put your faith just in physical strength and the imposition of authority turns out to be misconception. When Aslan places his paws on the children, they are aware that he sheaths his claws. When Aslan delivers himself up to the White Witch, he submits without a fight. Here Lewis draws parallels with the Christ figure as the expected hero who overcomes by force, the Messiah as Potentate, but also more generally on the human expectation that 'winning' is dependent on physical strength, on having greater force, on the influence of domination and power, - all important aspects of the context of war. Yet the children learn that victory comes through submission, through admission of vulnerability, through non-engagement, rendering the force of power itself powerless. Aslan is bound, humiliated, jeered and tormented. He is told that his pact to save Edmund will be reneged upon and is invited to despair. Obviously these events recall the Passion of Jesus, just as Aslan's sorrow and agreement to have the children follow and witness recalls the Gethsemane experience. But Lewis intends more than this parallel. For what is interesting is the children's observations of Aslan's power and his choice not to exercise it to cause destruction, and how the more Aslan refuses to resist, the more the evildoers fear him, knowing that their victory is hollow. There can be a danger in drawing a direct parallel between Aslan and the story of Christ, such that other elements in the story are mopped up along the way or overlooked.

The world which is redeemed is the whole creation, not just the whole physical world of humans, plants and animals, but the worlds of the imagination and myths. The Christian creation stories recalled in naming the children 'Son of Adam' and 'Daughter of Eve' are embedded in the world of naiads and dryads, fauns and centaurs. All the products of human imagination are caught up in this world and given value by the presence of Aslan.

Aslan is sacrificed on an altar, in response to the 'deep Magic' of the 'Emperor' calling up deep atavistic notions of sacrifice: life for life, blood for blood. Yet Aslan's death results in a reversal of all these notions, the breaking of the stone symbolises this. Death is overcome and Aslan's physical reality is again displayed for the children, they feel and smell him. Even more important, when Aslan returns from the dead, the tremendous energy of his life is released in a storm of play, of sheer delight in being truly and fully alive, a play that includes the children in a celebration of present reality, something which we, as Christians, tend overlook in our philosophical and metaphysical examinations of the meaning of the Resurrection. So it is that when Aslan breathes on the frozen statues, they feel his breath and are restored to life, they receive the spirit. They *are*.

### *Partnership*

Yet Aslan does not bring Narnia back into the springtime by his command alone. The children are required to be his partners (and this is surely why the Witch fears them) and to work with him in establishing the kingdom of his springtime and the realisation of heaven. Lucy is given the task of being a healer (by means of her 'Christmas present'). Peter is the strong warrior. Edmund, ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven, is among them

all the only one to be qualified to embody Justice, - for having been in the thrall of sin (and Turkish Delight) he is best placed to understand wrongdoing and to show compassion and mercy. So when the children are crowned and take possession of the redeemed creation that is Narnia, their particular gifts distinguish them. In this kingdom, Aslan ceases directly to affect events, leaving the children to grow up and assume responsibility for the peace and stability of the kingdom.

*Purpose*

Becoming kings and queens of Narnia is not the end of the story, as it might be in a traditional fairy or fantasy story. Rather the four children have to return, via the White Stag and the guiding light to the ordinary human world, but their adventures have taught them that human life has value, purpose and meaning. They have encountered the reality that is to come and which is their inheritance. Theirs is a story to be treasured in their hearts and not bandied around wildly but used in discernment. The Professor suggests to them that they keep their eyes open, for out there are others who have also encountered Aslan in the kingdom of Narnia and they also have stories to tell and share.