

Archive 2002

Magic in the web

- *A sign of hope?*

By Father Michael Harper

It was Shakespeare who referred in his play *Othello* to “magic in the web”, so clearly we are not referring here to the Internet. The full quotation is, “’tis true, there’s magic in the web of it”. In this play and many others Shakespeare introduces the notion of magic, an element which is a frequent subject in the whole range of English literature. A good Christmas example would be Charles Dickens’s *Christmas Carol*.

When I was a boy “magic” was a vital part of the whole experience of Christmas. Foremost there was the mysterious figure of Father Christmas, and his journey down the chimney on Christmas Day. I did also believe in fairies, and once astonished my parents when I solemnly told them I had seen them early one morning at the bottom of the garden. Angels? Christmas was in those days a welcome invasion of our secular and materialistic world by irrational forces which inspired awe.

But seldom have we experienced such an invasion of “magic” as this Christmas with the appearance on cinema screens of both *Harry Potter* and the *Lord of the Rings*, which have already beaten all attendance records. Added to this C S Lewis’ classic *the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is again on London’s West End stage, especially for Christmas audiences.

There are some Christians who see this as a threat. In fact Christians in one town in England managed to get the Harry Potter film banned from their local cinema.

“Magic” to some Christians is a threat to faith, and an encouragement of the occult and demonic powers. Certainly there is a huge market for this kind of literature.

JRR Tolkien’s books have sold over 100 million copies, and C S Lewis’ books, especially the Narnia series, included in which is *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, are selling more today than when the author was alive thirty-five years ago. In addition to J K Rowling, the author of the Harry Potter books, who is expected to be the first ever billionaire author, there are the extremely popular books of Philip Pullman and Iain Banks.

I have to confess I do not see this as a threat, but as a sign of hope. Does it not show that people realise that you can’t get everything at Tesco’s? That there is something more to life than surfing the internet, watching television, and keeping up with the latest time-saving gadget. That life is not to be measured entirely by what we can see with our eyes, hear with our ears or touch with our hands. In other words that there is, as Shakespeare says, “magic in the web of it”. That the web of life contains “magic”, and you can’t understand, or even enjoy life without it.

To grasp this, however, we need to do a reinterpretation of the word “magic”. If we take C S Lewis, JRR Tolkien and J K Rowling, we see in their writings gigantic battles between good and evil. And good prevails. They are using fictional devices to demonstrate the reality of the spiritual forces of good and evil. The battle in reality is between the angels and the demons. It is going on ceaselessly. As Orthodox we should use the word “mystery” rather than “magic” to describe the grace of God active outside the realm of our senses. We are to join in this battle - not by playing computer games or watching films about it, but by prayer and supplication, and our faith in the victory of God in Christ over all the power of the enemy.

I do see all this as a sign of hope at the end of what has been a particularly bad year for mankind. It indicates that people have a hunger for the mysteries of life. Many are not satisfied with mere material things, and more and more of what is seen, heard and touched. They are feeling after something else - called "magic" by many, but in effect, the "mysteries of God". The Hobbits are moving in, and we now leave from platform 9 3/4 at King's Cross.

Dealing with Anger

by Fr. Michael Harper

September 11th will be a day none of us will ever forget. When I switched on our television I thought I was watching a film - it was so unreal. The vision of horror in New York that day will stay with us for a long time to come.

The panic reaction of so many was predictable and understandable. We all need to think and pray carefully about where we go from here, from our top international leaders to each one of us. A person who can help us is the apostle Paul, not least because he obviously had a short fuse himself.

In Ephesians he wrote, "be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil" (4:26-27). So Paul recognises there is a proper place for anger, in fact he believed in certain circumstances it was an obligation. It is not *per se* a sin, but it can easily lead to sin if we are not careful.

What and when is anger *sinful*?

1 *Anger that exceeds the time limit.* Paul says that anger is permissible only until the sun sets. The philosopher Plutarch once wrote, "make it a rule to shake hands by sunset". Anger can be a God given emotion, but if we allow it to fester it can seriously damage our health, and cause problems in the wider Christian community. This does not mean we cannot be strongly motivated to take action in response to injustices; but the anger element should not be part of that response.

2 *Anger that has no reasonable basis.* In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus warned his listeners "anyone who is angry with his brother *without a cause* will be subject to judgement" (Mt 5:22). We must avoid groundless bursts of anger. It can open a door to Satan. This may be because anger encourages irrationality, hence the importance of seeing that our anger is justified (based on facts and not rumours) and that it never lasts longer than a day. Once Satan is in the house of our hearts he can cause havoc in our lives. We are told that Christ was sometimes angry, but He never allowed it to take over his life.

St Gregory of Nyssa sees anger as a "watchdog" to be roused only against sin when it attacks us. It should only be used against the enemy "who is creeping in to plunder the divine treasure chamber".

3 *Anger that is easily provoked.* When Jonah was angry with God for not wiping out the Ninevites he confesses, "I knew you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love" (Jonah 4:2) It is a pity he did not at first accept the logic of what he believed! James also writes, "everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to

become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires" (1:19-20)

Anger is very easily kindled when we don't listen carefully, and when we speak too often. There is nothing in life more destructive than unbridled anger, and it is no surprise to find this point mentioned in the famous hymn of love in 1 Corinthians 13, "love is not easily angered". Paul goes on, "it keeps no record of wrongs". We can only be at peace and be instruments of peace and reconciliation when we have discovered the secret of forgiving and forgetting wrongs.

4 *Anger that is unforgiving*. Forgiveness is not easy, in fact we can only forgive with God's help, it is a miracle! The recent events in Manhattan, New York, will be taken by many as unforgivable. But we have to forgive over and over again. When Jesus was asked if one should forgive seven times, He replied, "not seven times, but I tell you seventy-seven times" (Matthew 18:22). It is the only sure way of thwarting the attacks of Satan and of allowing the Holy Spirit to form the character of Jesus Christ in his people. It is interesting that the Talmud says one should forgive one's enemies, but not necessarily other people's.

Jesus speaks bluntly about the unforgiving person, who will have to pay a heavy price, for that person is in a hypothetical prison, from which he will not be released until he has paid the last penny.

One of the Desert Fathers said, "malice will never drive out malice. But if someone does an evil act to you, you should do good to him, so that by your good work you may destroy his malice."

From Fr. Michael Harper ...

The famous book by C S Lewis Screwtape Letters was published just sixty years ago. In it the author wrote imaginary letters from one Demon to another. Through an unusual channel some more letters have come to light, and here is the first:

My dear Wormwood,

Exactly sixty years ago my father was writing to your father to encourage him in the battle against the Enemy and his silly followers. What a lot has happened in these years! I notice you are taking much more holiday than he was able to. The Enemy's followers are making such fools of themselves without our assistance it is making our task a lot easier, but be on your guard, the battle isn't won yet!

You have asked my advice about your new patient, and particularly because he is showing an unfortunate interest in the Orthodox Church. My father always saw them as our most dangerous adversary. They never seemed to respond to our suggestions that they needed to change and become modern. Many of our Enemy's followers have fallen for that one hook, line and sinker. The glorious thing about trying to be modern is that you can never stop; it is an endless pursuit of an unobtainable goal. You are "modern" one day, and then you have to change again. But we love seeing them trying so hard. But this is not the way of the stupid Orthodox, who stubbornly stick to their old beliefs and out-of-date services. Another

problem with these old-fashioned people is they don't claim to be "post-modern". They are not even modern. We have never been so foolish as to try to be modern ourselves, for we know it would be our undoing. So this is a hopeless tactic with these awful Orthodox people.

Another one of our successful ploys, which some of our agents have played to perfection, is the need to be "relevant". Fortunately no one seems bothered as to whether they should be relevant to our Enemy, as long as they are relevant to the latest social or political trends. Do keep them at it, for it makes them feel smug and self-satisfied, but it is no good trying this on the Orthodox. They look and seem the most irrelevant people on the face of the Enemy's earth. Leave well alone.

So what are you to do? First of all it is important to stop your man going to any services. If he does go it could be fatal. Get him to think "I must study Orthodoxy before I can experience it". I know some of my patients who are still studying it thirty years later! That fixes them. Sadly there is so much to study in Orthodoxy, but we can twist this to our own advantage. Get him so interested in the "theory" of Orthodoxy that he is not interested in doing anything about it. It is a particular pleasure to see people going to Hell with their brains stuffed with theology. We don't need to worry how much they learn as long as they don't do anything about it.

But if he does decide to go the battle is not lost, you can still confuse him. My father, who, as I have said, warned me about the Orthodox Church, used to play a trump card, which always turned out a winner. He convinced the majority of people that the Orthodox Church was a foreign religion and nothing to do with being "English". You will not find this too difficult because the majority of Orthodox in Britain are not born British. And it is this policy which I recommend to you.

Keep your patient reading for as long as possible. But if he does decide to "try it out" and go to an Orthodox Church, then make sure he goes to one where the services are in foreign languages. That will confuse him. He won't understand anything, and will conclude that it is not for the British people. After the service make sure he only meets foreigners, which will not be too difficult because most of them will be non-British. Get him invited to have some food but make sure the food is also "foreign".

But beware, Wormwood, of the cunning Antiochians who have all their services in English. Keep him away from them, for they are a new threat to us, and need to be taken seriously. In my next letter I will show you how to deal with this dangerous development.

Your affectionate uncle

Screwtape

Anger

by Fr. Jonathan Hemmings

"Be angry, and do not sin, do not let the sun go down on your wrath." (Ephesians 4:26)

Anger can be a destructive force that does more harm to us than upon those whom we vent it. For this reason St. Paul gives the sound counsel to be reconciled with others before the day is over echoing Christ's own imperative in Matthew 5:23,24:

"Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you leave your gift there, before the altar and go your way. First, be reconciled to your brother and then come and offer your gift."

It is often not the big things in life that cause arguments but the little things. We may have fallen out of friendship with someone we know over something quite inconsequential and small but anger causes pride and we try to justify our righteous indignation with rampart defence mentality and further vitriol. The trivial becomes magnified and magnitudes become trivialised. It only takes something little to upset our equilibrium and lose our sense of proportion. The evil one knows this only too well and uses it to great effect if we allow him. It is for this reason that St John Chrysostom advises us to direct this anger in a positive way. not at others or ourselves but at the evil one.

"This is why God has armed us with anger. Not that we should thrust the sword against our own bodies, but that we should baptise the whole blade in the devil's breast." St John Chrysostom

Elder Joseph the Hesychast in one of his letters to one of his spiritual children writes that: -

"Anger in itself is natural. Just as the body has nerves, the soul has anger. Everyone should use it against the demons, heretics, and anyone who hinders us from the path of God. However, if you get angry with your fellow brothers, or get in a rage and ruin the work of your hands, know that you are suffering from vainglory and are abusing the nerve of your soul. You are delivered from this passion through love towards all and humility."

First, we must recognise the anger welling up inside and this is not difficult since anger is truly psychosomatic with increased heart rate and blood pressure. Then we should close our mouth tightly so that the demon of anger is not allowed a voice. When we are cursed we should answer with a blessing since man was created by God as a rational and gentle being. Others are corrected far better with love and gentleness rather than with anger and harshness.

Proverbs 15:1-4 "A soft answer turns away anger, but a sharp word makes tempers hot. A wise man's tongue spreads knowledge: stupid men talk nonsense. A soothing word is the staff of life but a mischievous tongue breaks the spirit."

We must suppress anger with all the grace and might that God gives to us and we will find it weaker when the passion is aroused on future occasions. Indeed, the Apostle Paul identifies anger as one of the works of the flesh(Galatians 5:20) and gentleness and self control as two of the fruits of the Spirit.(Galatians 5:22).

From the Desert Fathers ...

There were three friends.....and the first chose to reconcile those who were fighting against each other. As it is said "Blessed are the peacemakers." The second chose to visit the sick. The third went to live in prayer and stillness in the desert. Now in spite of all his labours, the first could not make peace in all men's quarrels, and in sorrow he went to the one who was serving the sick and found him also disheartened. So they went to see the one who was living in stillness and prayer and told him their difficulties .After a short silence he poured water into a bowl and said to them "Look at the water," and it was disturbed. After a while he said: "Look again." and they could see their faces reflected in the still water. Then he said: "It is the same for those who live among men: disturbance prevents them from seeing their faults but when man is still, then he sees his failings.

God's Economy

LXX Psalm 103 (104);24 " O Lord, how manifold are Your works!

In wisdom You have made them all,

*The earth is
full of Your
possessions...
..."*

It is hard to imagine life without the modern advantages of washing machines, cars and computers but there was a time even before farming, fire and metals. We can go back to a time when life existed before these fundamentals were discovered or invented. We think of the wheel as the basis of modern civilisation but evidence from archaeology of communities employing agriculture goes back some 7,000 years. Early human society began when our ancestors exchanged their nomadic existence for a settled way of life when language, writing and culture developed. With the settled way of life came also the ability and opportunity to observe and record God's creation. Stonehenge is a testimony to man's inquisitiveness, ingenuity, observation and application whatever the speculation one may place upon its "religious" significance.

God called Abram from a nomadic existence to a settled way of life:

"Now the Lord had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will show thee. "Gen. 12:1

The faith that Abram demonstrated was in a God who would lead him to a different way of life. Such faith required obedience and ingenuity (the capacity to reproduce God's creative energy).

Faith is the substance of our relationship with God and our reckoning of righteousness but this latter attribute of ingenuity is equally important. God gave to Abram the resources to be the person he had called him to be.

How did our early ancestor make and control fire? How did they realise that it could be used to transform clay into pottery or a lump of metal into a spearhead?

When God created man and woman in His own image he also gave them:

..."dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth. "Genesis 1:28

From the beginning mankind was given stewardship over God's creation whereby we were imbued

with authority and the wherewithal, the necessary creativity of mind and capacity to imitate the love, care and control of the Pantocrator for His Creation. God gave us the ability to think for ourselves and to make moral choices. Archimandrite Sophrony expresses this succinctly when he writes in "His Life is Mine":

"In the beginning God creates our spirit as pure potential. What follows does not depend altogether on Him. Man is free to disagree, even to resist Him....Born as pure potential, our spirit must go on to actualise our being as hypostasis."

This means also that man should exercise science (knowledge) and technology (application) according to the Divine pattern. We pray in the Lord's prayer:

"Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven..."

The "actualisation" of this must result from our co-operation with the Creator in His Creation.

We may observe a lesson taught by God to the escaping Israelites in the wilderness when their greed and avarice concerning the provision of manna got the better of them. Exodus 16:17-21

The words of Christ our Saviour in the teaching of the Lord's prayer allude to this event *"give us this day our daily bread."*

Christ gives us the supersubstantial bread of life. He is indeed the very Bread of Life who feeds us for the eternal day of the Kingdom nourishing our bodies and our souls.

I recall a monk on one occasion after being offered more food at table remarking, "I have had an excellent sufficiency!" The Greek word *"autarkeia"* conveys this sense of being satisfied with what we have been given. God's economy supplies what we need rather than what we want. This economy which is rightly divided by generosity and sharing was brought home to me again recently on my visit to Romania. On an excursion through Transylvania our guide observed the relative richness of the area. He illustrated this, by pointing: "Look" he said, "there is a cow in each field" I asked: "Why is there only one cow in each field?" to be met with the answer "but that is more than enough for each household and their guests!"

The abuse and misuse of power finds an expression in ecological exploitation in today's affluent society. Global warming, the ever-increasing demand for ever-diminishing finite fossil fuels requires humankind to re-evaluate their responsibilities, and to relearn and revise the scriptures teaching on stewardship. Modern man is arrogant about his technology. A little humility and an appreciation of creation such as our ancestors possessed would be useful. Along with obedience and temperance, ingenuity is required in our search for renewable, affordable, reliable energy resources that we can manage for the future generations.

1 Peter 4:20 *"As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God."*

Fr. Jonathan

Spiritual Battlefields

"But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us." 2Corinthians 4:7

In this part of the Apostle's letter to the faithful at Corinth, St. Paul outlines the death of Christ that every Christian carries in their bodies so that the power of God may be made manifest. When we own our faith, the relationship we have in Christ brings us face to face with attacks from the evil one and from those in whom he finds a home. The adversary is the "father of lies" so we will experience hostility to our Orthodox faith; not neutrality or indifference but attack that always challenges the Truth. Such trials come to us, as St. John Chrysostom says, in order to "show the power of God and disclose His Grace." Indeed, such trials and battles are tests of our faith and an inevitable consequence of our allegiance to Christ. Those who adopt the cross as a talisman in the expectation of a trouble-free "fair weather" form of life delude themselves. Christ brings Victory through His suffering on the Cross-and we share in that suffering through "taking up our cross."

"For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh." 2 Corinthians 4; 11.

Christ warns his disciples in the farewell discourse of John's Gospel that the world would hate them as it hated him, (John 15:18, 17:14) and the same warning is echoed in Matthew's Gospel 10:32. St Isaac the Syrian in his second discourse on the "Ascetical Life" observes:

"The friend of virtue is not the one who diligently does beautiful things, but the one who gladly accepts the evil things which cling to him."

Such spiritual attacks on the body, mind, heart and soul come in various forms. These attacks are always personal since the evil one and his agents wage war against the temple of the Holy Spirit, which is our body-"the earthen vessel." St Paul outlines where these assaults are to be found in 2 Corinthians 10:4-6. The battlefields of spiritual warfare are:

Strongholds- pervasive and persuasive entrenched heresies that war against Christ and his Church. The "watchtower" is a symbol of a present day heresy which denies the divinity of Christ as Arius did much earlier. (Arius was a heretic of the 3rd and 4th centuries AD who taught that the Son, although the agent by whom all else was made was himself created. Their slogan was "there was a time when he was not".

Arguments- human reason and empty philosophy based on worldly values that question absolutes or essentials of our faith and that undermine the necessity of giving glory to the Creator. This open-ended form of speculation and intellectual gamesmanship discounts revelation and is a vexation to the spirit.

Every high thing that exalts itself-human agencies and angelic powers that abuse their authority, overreach their knowledge and that vaunt themselves through pride.

Thought-ideas and personal opinions that run contrary to faith and doctrine. The fathers teach us not to ponder or dwell on thoughts that the heart may fire into a passion and that may lead to an evil word or action. Once they asked Abba Silouan: "What asceticism did you practice, Father, to receive this wisdom?" And he answered: "I never left a thought in my heart that might anger God."

Disobedience-the will of man that prefers his own way rather than the way and will of God.

Our weapons in such territories are: making the sign of the Cross, submissiveness to the Will of God, penitence, obedience to the Gospel of Christ and constancy in prayer.

Again in his fourth discourse from the "Ascetical Life" St Isaac the Syrian advises:

"Endure contempt and humiliation with a virtuous mind for the sake of confidence of heart before God. For every hard word which a person endures with discernment, except for when he is the cause of the offence, he will receive a crown of thorns on his head for the sake of Christ, blessed be He."

The willingness to endure calumnies lies at the very heart of the Beatitude:

"Blessed are you when they revile you and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you for My sake. Rejoice and be exceeding glad for great is your reward in heaven." Matthew 5:11

We see this exemplified countless times in the lives of the saints. We only have to look at one of the most modern and popular of saints St. Nektarios to see how he bravely endured and overcame false accusation from his contemporaries. Even in the Church there are those like Judas who still betray Christ by a kiss which is the lipservice of outward appearance of discipleship.

"Do you look at things according to the outward appearance?" 2Corinthians 10:7

Despite such warnings from Christ and His apostles and the evidence from the lives of the saints Christians are often unprepared to meet such attacks either through ignorance, forgetfulness or pride. The Holy Spirit provides His gift of spiritual discernment (I Corinthians 12:10) for the Church in order to test the spirits and confirm the faithful in the common mind of Christ.

Our beloved Patriarch, His Beatitude Ignatios IV of Antioch and all the East in his book "The Resurrection and Modern Man" points to the centrality of the Cross in the battleground:

The Cross stands at the very heart of the mystery of life, and this is why it is wisdom: How can we escape from the darkness we find ourselves in without a battle? How can egotism, injustice, hardness of heart, falsehood, divisions, human degradation etc. be removed from the heart of man without a struggle? This battle that Christ carried out alone, but for all of us, upon the Cross must be our own battle as well. We struggle "in Him" to be sure but such a struggle with our participation is necessary. Otherwise we would merely be saved from the outside, as it were, like objects and therefore we would not be saved at all... ..only the Cross of Christ reveals itself to be the power of God: thus the Cross becomes our Resurrection within our day to day struggle."

To be forewarned is to be forearmed. We should not be surprised by attacks. Rather, we need to put on the whole armour of God to defend our faith and ourselves (Ephesians 6:11) until the day of Christ's coming again in glory. No struggle, no victory; no Cross- no Resurrection. We are merely earthen vessels yet these vessels contain His uncreated divine energy that is to be exercised daily in the conflict. Through the heat and fire of battle we are purified like iron in the furnace until we too glow in His uncreated Light and are filled with the fullness of God.

Ephesians 3:20,21:

"Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the Church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen."

Fr. Jonathan

The Warmth of Faith

"Increase our faith." Luke 17:5

This, the hope of every Christian soul echoes the words of the Apostles. A strong desire is the feature of faith that we find in the images that Christ sets before us in the Holy Gospels. Zacchaeus, the Woman with the haemorrhage and Blind Bartimaeus are just three examples from many of those who possessed this fervent hope and determined single-mindedness to meet and see Our Lord. It is interesting to note that in these encounters it is those that are in need that seek Christ and pursue Him despite the rebuttal and indifference of others. Through their actions they so eloquently express the passionate cry of the heart to cast off the particular chains that bound them in dis-ease. They resort to drastic measures in a pro-active assault upon the Master. Whoever is a hearer and lover of the Word made flesh "takes the kingdom by force" exerting, as the fathers teach us, all their reserves of energy in order to enter into the kingdom of heaven. Matt 11:12.

Lk. 19:23 " And there was a man named Zacchaeus he was a chief tax-collector and rich. And he sought to see who Jesus was but could not.....so he ran on ahead and climbed into a sycamore tree to see him...."

Lk. 8:43,44." And a woman who had a flow of blood for twelve years and could not be healed by anyone, came up behind him, and touched the fringe of His garment; and immediately her flow of blood ceased. And He said to her" Daughter, your faith has made you well."

Mk.10: 47, 48" And when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he (Blind Bartimaeus)began to cry out and say Jesus Son of David, have mercy on me.and he cried out all the more"

These three examples, in their own way, exhibit distinctive, persistent action that accompanies the warmth of faith, heated by the desire that will not take "no" for an answer. Contrast this with the warning that Christ brings through the revelation to St. John the Divine to the Church in Laodicea :

Rev.3:16 " I will vomit you out of my mouth..., because you are lukewarm and neither cold nor hot."

Our Lord would rather have us cold than lukewarm, half-hearted or nominal in our Christian faith, nothing less than total commitment is good enough, since that is what God's commitment is to us, total. The warmth of faith is full of the Holy Spirit. This truth, stated by the priest at the infusion of hot water into the Chalice during the Holy Mysteries is essential to our spiritual growth. Our Lord points to the eagerness, enthusiasm and sheer exuberance of children as a prerequisite for acceptance in the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 18:3,4.

So why are so many people without faith or lacking in faith today. The cynicism of our modern age does not help with its analytic approach to life. Neither does the materialism that lulls us into a false sense of security. Such blandishments are not conducive to faith. Atheism often appeals to the intellect rather than the conscience and will of a person. The thought of God is not comfortable to those who are living in sin and the atheist often embraces the notion of the non-existence of God in order to justify his actions. To go on sinning without having to feel guilt is a matter of the will rather than the intellect. In order for faith to blossom we must want God as well as need Him. In His love and respect for mankind God gives us the choice. In the encounter with the lame man at the pool in John's gospel (John 5:6) it is important to observe that Jesus asks him " Do you want to be healed?" A desire to be healed on the part of the infirm man was necessary.

In "The Pilgrim Continues his way" the unknown Russian writer shows how we may first obtain faith:

" For the salvation of the soul, first of all true faith is necessary. Holy Scripture says, "Without faith it is impossible to please God."Heb.11: 6. He who has not faith will be judged. But from the same Holy Scriptures one can see that man cannot himself bring to birth in him faith even as a grain of mustard seed; that faith is a spiritual gift. It is given by the Holy Spirit. That being so, what is to be done? How is one to reconcile man's need of faith with the impossibility of producing it from the human side? The way to do this is revealed in the same scriptures: "Ask, and it shall be given you." The Apostles could not of themselves arouse the perfection of faith within them, but they prayed to Jesus Christ, " Lord, increase our faith."

We must not relegate faith to an intellectual activity of the mind although we are rationally endowed creatures who can observe facts and assemble them. Rather, we have to leap through these facts to the truth that underlines and unifies them. Such a leap is not unreasonable. In a blazing house fire to leap through the window into a safety blanket below would save our life. Yet, it takes courage, trust and action; it is a matter of our will to live by responding towards the offer of life that is held out beneath us.

Faith is indeed a gift, a grace to be cherished, nurtured and used. "Believing in God" is a world apart from believing that there is a God. The verbal expression of faith is to be seen throughout the Holy Scriptures in terms of a relationship with God where faith has an expectant and cathartic quality to it, despite the suffering, pain and sorrow.

G.A. Studdert Kennedy whose understanding of faith, life and death was forged in the carnage of the First World War as a chaplain expressed this in a more poetic way when he writes:

" I back the scent of life against its stink. That's what faith works out at, finally."

The Unutterable Beauty

So many people express that superficial sentiment " I wish I had your faith" without being willing to spend any time with God in prayer or live out His gospel. Such transient vain wishes have no substance in the will. If we ask for an increase in faith we must be prepared to act on it when we receive it. Boldness in faith will bring us to the very heart of the Gospel and will lead us to a greater love of our Saviour. One of the early Christian writers, Cassian, described what it meant to place our desire for God first in our life:

" God will be our whole love and desire, our whole study and labour, our whole thought, our whole life, our speaking and our breathing.... We will be so attached to Him that our whole yearning and thinking and speaking will be about Him alone."

When our faith puts Christ first and above all then every other desire finds its proper place and meaning. It is then, when faith is warmed by love that we must expect miracles to happen.

Father Jonathan

Power, Fear and Faith - a Meditation on the Gospel for the 18th Sunday after Pentecost. *Luke 8.41-56.*

The theme today is Jesus' acts of healing. We read in the Gospel the story of how he raised the 12-year old daughter of Jairus, the ruler of the synagogue, from the dead; and also how, while he was on the way to the ruler's house, a woman who touched the hem of his garment was cured of a haemorrhage from which she had been suffering for 12 years.

Unfortunately, when I read the story of Jairus' daughter, I am reminded, rather irreverently, of an Indian lady I know. In the East people of all faiths still indulge in the public weeping and bewailing when somebody dies as described in the story. This lady is particularly good at it; but, unfortunately, she doesn't always wait until the person is dead!

She visited a young man in the intensive care unit at the local hospital who had been run over by a car. As soon as she arrived began her wailing. The staff had to usher her out, for fear she should cause a relapse.

What can we say, though, about Jesus' acts of healing? Surely the first impression is of tremendous power. Jesus has absolute power over the natural world. Not only does he heal the sick; he raised Jairus' little girl from the dead. It is what we should expect. He is the incarnate Son of God.

There is also something physical, as well as spiritual, about this power. For when the woman with the issue of blood touched the hem of his garment, Jesus felt power go out of him. Divine healing is physical as well as spiritual.

The second thing we notice about Jesus' power of healing is that it inspires fear. When the woman healed of the haemorrhage realised she had been noticed she was terrified, and prostrated herself, trembling, before Jesus' feet. Rightly so. She was encountering divine power. Jesus is the Son of God.

On the other hand, Jairus and his wife do not seem to have been afraid. At least there is no mention of their being afraid in the story. Perhaps they were so anxious about their only child they could think of nothing else.

For we can confront the Son of God only with reverence and fear. There are congregations in the West these days which encourage their members to believe that “Jesus is our mate”. Jesus is not our mate. He is our Creator. Of course Jesus is also “one of us”. For our sake, he willingly became one of us by being born of the Virgin Mary. But we must never forget that Jesus Christ is God as well as man. We approach him with reverence and fear.

But we also approach him with faith. That is the third thing to notice about Jesus’ acts of healing. Jairus and his wife and the woman with the issue of blood had faith. They trusted Jesus completely. Divine healing works only when the people being cured have faith. God does not act without our co-operation. God does most of the work. Healing is mostly the work of divine grace, which is God’s gift to us. But the person being healed must co-operate. He or she must have faith.

Jesus said to the woman cured of the issue of blood: “Daughter, be of good comfort: thy faith hath made thee whole. Go in peace.” (Luke 8.48). He did not say, “I have cured thee”; although, of course, he had. Her faith was needed as well.

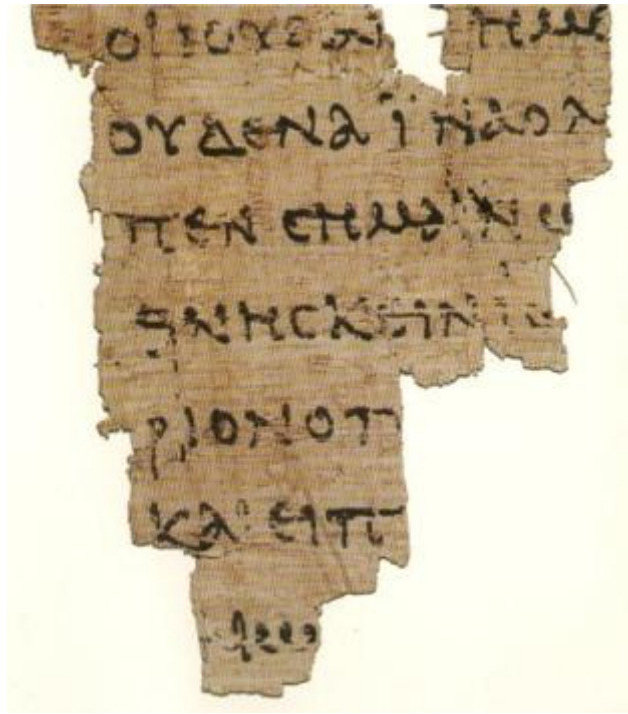
We should remember, though, that our faith is also God’s gift. God made us in his own image, and so everything we are is God’s gift. God offers us his grace, and has provided us with the ability to accept it.

So there are these three things to note about Jesus’ acts of healing - power, fear and faith. We should approach the power of God in Jesus Christ with fear, but also with faith. It is important for us to keep this in mind, for we are all in need of healing; if not of physical healing, certainly of spiritual healing. Jesus has the power to heal us, which is the power of the Son of God. So we approach him with reverence and fear; but also with complete trust in him - with faith.

Often our faith is weak. I know mine is. It is difficult to go on believing in the absolute power of God in today’s world, in which the forces of secularisation (which means the forces of evil) seem overwhelming. We may feel especially despondent at present, after what has happened recently in a theatre in Moscow. When so many innocent people have been killed (some would say unnecessarily).

What can our mostly small (indeed sometimes tiny) congregations do against the forces of secularisation? The answer is - nothing, of ourselves. But God can do everything. If we co-operate with the power of God - trust in the power of God, with both fear and faith; by the power of God, our parish, our part of the country, the whole of Great Britain - indeed the whole world will become a very different place.

Peter Sizer



"What is Truth?" John 18:38

These are the words that Pontius Pilate used when interrogating Jesus at His trial. It was a cynical response to Our Lord's declaration as a witness to God's truth. Such cynicism is a feature of those who still question Christ and His claims today. When I was an undergraduate student of Biblical Studies in the 1970's it was a time when everything in theology was questioned. Liberalism was in the ascendancy. At that time it was not just fashionable to question one's faith and its Biblical and Ecclesiastical structures, it was almost compulsory. Those who held a conservative or traditional understanding of the Bible were dismissed as being outdated. My favourite Gospel of St. John came under scrutiny and was presented by the western Biblical theologians of the day as a product of theological evolution, the result of Gnostic heretical thought and too late to be considered reliable. The prevalent and pernicious heresy that somehow Christ's divinity was a late invention of the Church still haunts universities and theological colleges today. Yet elsewhere in scripture St. Paul was claiming the same truth about Christ as St. John. Writing to the Colossians in A.D.61 he says:

"He (Christ) is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him." Col.1: 15,16

One leading liberal scholar of the 1970's later reversed much of his thinking over the date of St. John's Gospel. An amazing piece of evidence containing the words of Pilate: "What is Truth?" set the theological world on fire when it was dated to A.D.130. This little fragment measuring 8.9 cm. X 5.8 cm. resides in the John Rylands Library in Manchester. It was acquired in 1917 as part of a large collection of ancient manuscripts but its significance was not realised until relatively recently.

The fragment is part of a leaf of papyrus codex 457 and conforms to the universal Christian custom of writing on both sides of papyrus to form a book; rather than the Hebrew custom of writing on a scroll. We can estimate, based on the number of letters on each line that it would have consisted of 288 leaves to include all four gospels. However, the indications suggest that this formed a part of just the Gospel of St. John. The handwriting is fine and careful though not calligraphic in style. There is no breathing or punctuation in the words or any trace of numeration for the verses. Again, based on the calculation of the average number of letters on each line, since margin depth is consistent, we can maintain that the name Jesus was written in full rather than being abbreviated. The provenance of this fragment is probably Oxyrhynchus or Fayum in Egypt since both had early Christian communities.

The significance of this is great. We have St. John's gospel being read in Egypt by a Christian community as early as A.D.130. The text is exactly the same as much later gospels. This fragment from a codex written within half a century of the composition of the Gospel presents us with the fact that this it was a copy found distantly from its place of origin.

This little piece of paper places St. John's Gospel clearly in the first century A.D. and can be seen in the John Ryelands Library in Manchester, England.

"What is Truth?"

"Your word is Truth" John 17:17.

It seems that it was not I that was outdated after all!

Fr. Jonathan Hemmings

The famous book by C S Lewis Screwtape Letters was published just sixty years ago. In it the author wrote imaginary letters from one Demon to another. Through an unusual channel some more letters have come to light, and here is the second:

"Keep your eyes on the Orthodox, damn them", writes Screwtape

By Father Michael Harper

The famous book by C S Lewis Screwtape Letters was published just sixty years ago. In it the author wrote imaginary letters from one Demon to another. Through an unusual channel some more letters have come to light. Here is another:

My dear Wormwood,

I am glad that you have responded positively to my last letter, and better still begun to do something about it. I do worry a lot about the Orthodox people. As you know we can see the potential in anything long before the human vermin catch on - so we at least have a head start. My constant worry is that the English will suddenly realise what they have been missing all these centuries, so we must work hard to keep them distracted, to see the shabby exterior and not to look deeper.

It is possible for us to be in two minds about something. The Orthodox never seem to want to push their cause - and that is good for us. We certainly don't want people to know. It was good that no Orthodox Bishop was present at the Queen Mother's funeral, where a billion people would have seen him. Yet, dear Wormwood, there is a catch to this. Modesty is not something we want either, because it makes people more like our Arch Enemy Christ, and that would never do.

In my last letter I warned you about those dangerous Antiochians. An English variety has recently sprung up in Britain, and of all crazy things started *British Churches*. We didn't like the Greeks when they started coming, but it was a help when they called some of their Churches after obscure Greek saints. These Antiochians have called theirs after *British*

saints. This means that British people will link them to their heritage and it deals a terrible blow to our campaign, to make people think that the Orthodox Church is foreign. We have got to do something about this before a lot of people have their eyes open to the fact that it is not a foreign religion, but something just as much for them.

But you must never forget our other strategy which is to sow seeds of doubt in the minds of Orthodox people. One way is to go on accusing these Antiochian upstarts of being "single issue" converts, until they believe it. Then they will have to leave this dangerous Orthodox movement. The ordination of women to the priesthood, which that great enemy of ours (CS Lewis) called "another religion," gave some Anglicans the conviction they must leave their Church and become Orthodox. That is the "single" issue. Keep their minds on that and hide from them the riches of Orthodoxy. Converts like this can be a nuisance to us, but so long as we can keep them to narrow and less important issues, they can be easily contained.

You know what is coming - Pascha. An occasion to be dreaded - for it is another nail in our coffin. Last year the Churches celebrated it on the same day - so we got it all over in 24 hours. This year we have had it hanging around for over a month, and these Orthodox are getting so excited. I always take the day off and hide myself so I can't hear their fiendish cries "He is Risen" and their interminably long services. This is one day in the year we can't do anything - for it is the seal of our ultimate fate. Our only hope is to delay our Enemy from achieving His goals, and his followers from extending the reality of Pascha to the rest of the year. That really would be the end for us.

Will be in touch again soon.

Your affectionate uncle

Screwtape

Christmas has NOT been cancelled

by Father Michael Harper

A recent headline told us that Christmas in Bethlehem this year had been "cancelled", thanks to the Israeli army which has declared it a war zone.

Once again this year we have seen the efforts of the media, sadly assisted by some elements of the Church, to question aspects of the Christmas story.

- Christopher Maunder, a Roman Catholic theologian, tells us that Christ's birth in Bethlehem is unconvincing, and Mark Goodacre, a Bible historian tells us that it was much more likely to have been in Nazareth.
- Mary is portrayed in a BBC documentary, as a heavily pregnant young girl pushed and pulled by circumstances, not as the Mother of God.
- An Anglican Bishop associates the visit of the wise men to spies looking for terrorists.

- The Rev Lee Rayfield told a children's carol concert in Maidenhead that Father Christmas could not "scientifically exist". Ulrika Jonsson, the TV presenter, whose young child was present, described the sermon as "every parent's nightmare."

So one could go on. One might hazard a guess that Ulrika Jonsson, like many others, is more concerned to preserve the Santa Claus myth, than whether Christ was born in Bethlehem, or his Mother was indeed the Mother of God.

Now – have I got news for you! Christmas is still alive and well, despite all efforts to undermine its message.

Leaving the Mother of God and Bethlehem on one side for the moment, let's look first at Father Christmas. In doing so we may get some clues as to why the media, and some elements of the Church, get it wrong every Christmas.

The Anglican priest would have done better to have started with a statement like this, "children, I want to tell you about the first Father Christmas". He could have gone on to tell the wonderful story of St Nicholas of Myra, miracles and all.

One would have thought in the light of the menace of paedophilia the story of a good Priest and Bishop, who actually loved children and did not abuse them would have been worth telling. In fact He actually went out of his way to protect children who were being threatened with the abuse of slavery.

The Orthodox Church has always preserved the concept of "mystery", and without it the Nativity story loses much of its meaning and significance. The Oxford Dictionary quite rightly defines the word in two quite distinct ways, the secular and the religious. For the secularist the word means something hidden or inexplicable. For the religious person, it means "religious truth divinely revealed, especially one beyond human reason".

In the Old Testament the word only comes in the Aramaic section of Daniel, where the word *raz* is translated in the Septuagint *mysterion*. But it comes into its own in the New Testament. Although it is only used three times in the Gospels, it is used no less than 21 times by St Paul. He sees it as a key word, and relates it to the plan of salvation or the gospel, as well as the nature of God himself, where the focus is Christ. In Colossians 2:2 Paul refers to "God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself".

We have seen this distinction plainly in the run up to Christmas. The BBC, many journalists and some newspapers, as well as some of the new Church *avant garde* are now so secularised that they can only accept the word "mystery" in the secular sense. Much of the Christmas story (and Santa Claus) is to them so irrational and unbelievable, they want to ditch it.

But Christians see it all in the second sense of the word "mystery". For them the Christmas story is shrouded in mystery in the truly biblical sense, something hidden but revealed by God (not by the *Daily Mirror!*) to humble believers.

One of the best books to be published this year is Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev's *Mystery of Faith*. It is aptly titled. True faith in God is beyond human reasoning. It is in the realm of "mystery". In the face of the secular assault on Christmas, our faith affirms that Mary was

the Mother of God, and that her Son was conceived by the Holy Spirit. That it was a Virgin Birth. Also that this took place in Bethlehem, affirmed by the Holy Scriptures and the Traditions of the Church. Also that Father Christmas did once exist in Turkey (the country not the bird!). And that St Nicholas still cares for children who are abused by others, because he is numbered amongst the communion of saints.

So let's enjoy Christmas – its mysteries hidden from the wise and prudent, but revealed to babes.

Fr. Michael Harper