

All Saints' Sunday  
Bruton Parish Church  
The Rev. John Maxwell Kerr  
Sunday, November 6, 2011

A Canterburyan, writing to me a month or so ago, wondered why C. S. Lewis' Narnia stories, despite being full of magic, good and bad, are thought to be wonderful Christian allegories suitable for children to read. Lewis, who wrote the stories, and so should have known if anyone did, said that the Narnia stories were NOT written as Christian allegory, though they were written for children.

Meanwhile, in some states, school boards and public library boards, whipped on by irate parents, want J. K. Rowlings' Harry Potter novels banned because they too are full of magic, good and bad, and are *also* not wonderful Christian allegory. And therefore, unsuitable for children to read.

This evening, I hope to speak for the defense, not against the Dark Arts, though that would be my chosen career path were Hogwarts to appoint me. I hope to mount a defense drawing the obvious connections between the character of the young wizard of Hogwarts with the interesting scar on his forehead, and the Beatitudes of the Gospel of St Matthew and throw in a few further startling theological revelations as well but first, a confession.

The Beatitudes from Matthew's Sermon on the Mount must have knocked the first hearers sideways when they heard them. However, twenty centuries of leaden exposition by unimaginative clergy have, putting it mildly, bludgeoned the poor things to death. Not the Beatitudes again? Of course they are wonderful but what can one say in a sermon that would be of use beyond just telling you to get on and read them?

Here is where Harry Potter can help. Take any Beatitude at random, say, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven." Exactly! Excellent. Nice to know that: a useful guide to blessedness. Now, what to do about it? Suppose one were, say, to set oneself a goal of being persecuted for righteousness' sake just 10% more this month, would that just leave another 90% of similar persecution before the Kingdom of Heaven were yours? I imagine you had not thought that. Being brought up in a country which aspires to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," even thinking of taking on a little light persecution goes rather against the grain, does it not? A similar approach, to being poor in spirit and so forth will meet the same *impasse*.

And here is the basic problem. It's a fine and good thing to be assured by our Lord that certain acts or traits of character conduce to blessedness. But the catch is that you need something else, there is a precondition, before you can even start to live the blessing-driven life.

You need the primary virtue of courage.

And Harry Potter shows us, his faithful reading public, what this means. At least, one of you will have thought, "It's all very well for Harry Potter to have the virtue of courage: he is a magician, a wizard." Yes, but so what? To say that is to misunderstand what Hogwarts is all about and seriously misrepresents young Harry.

What Harry demonstrates again and again would also be true for you, even though you are mere Mudbloods, I mean Muggles. Let me make an assumption: that you have read J.K Rowlings' novels or perhaps seen the movies, about Harry Potter.

If you have, unless you serve on one of those benighted school or library boards which see only witchcraft and wizardry, you must have noticed that the pupils of Hogwarts and those who teach them, solve most of their problems NOT merely by the use of magic but by intelligence (sometimes of Hermione-like standards), by planning, resourcefulness, perseverance, fidelity, Weasley-like friendliness and perhaps above all, courage. Just like us. These qualities are what the great philosophers called the virtues, with courage as the mother of virtues.

True, magic for the students and faculty of Hogwarts is a tool they do employ, but close reading of the text shows that magic is ultimately used by people, and it's ultimately the character of the person using the tool that determines how effectively it can be employed to solve problems. "Rowling's aim in the Harry Potter books is not at all to convey to her many readers the importance of magic in the lives of her characters, but rather to display the magical character of the classic virtues in their lives, and in any life." as the Philosopher Tom Morris noted

Hogwarts is a boarding school, rather like the one I attended (except we played rugby and cricket instead of Quidditch and there were various other differences, mainly to do with the wretched food we ate, served out by fiends.)

You may recall that at Hogwarts, there are four Houses to which pupils are assigned by Sorting Hat. The House Founders each valued different virtues. Gryffindor was founded "for the bravest." Harry Potter, Ron Weasley and Hemione Granger were all assigned to Gryffindor, as was the Headmaster, Dumbledore. There was also Ravensclaw for "the cleverest." Hufflepuff "for hard workers" and Slytherin for "those with great ambition."

Harry has it all: intelligence, diligence, and ambition, but he is assigned to the one house to recognize and support courage. And that's very interesting indeed, since young Harry Potter is represented by Rowling as being consistently terrified: "Harry's stomach turned over.." Harry's heart gave a horrible jolt..." "Harry's whole body went numb..." "Harry's brain seemed to have jammed..."

There. Just like you. Or me as a New Boy.

But Harry has courage, and courage, said Aristotle, is a fundamental virtue, the fundamental virtue, without which you can't exercise any of the other virtues. Especially under pressure. Courage is doing what is right, not what's easy, and it doesn't always lead to life, liberty or the pursuit of happiness. But it appears that Jesus recognizes that it may lead to blessedness.

I think it's time you went back and reread the whole series. When you do, you will finally come to the point where Harry Potter voluntarily gives up his life for his friends. Greater love has no-one than this. You will see Harry become more and more determined, not necessarily less frightened, in more and more darkly challenging circumstances in book after book. And you will see, - let all who read, see this and take note, - that by the steady exercise of courage, Harry Potter overcomes Voldemort and the forces of evil.

The Beatitudes tell us the character traits that lead to blessedness. They don't tell us how to set about acquiring such traits. But then again, they never suggest it can all be done with the wave of a magical wand from *Ollivanders: Makers of Fine Wands since 382 BC*. No magic wands in the Gospels, but no clues about what to do instead if you want to attain blessedness. But anyone who has read J.K. Rowling's admirable novels of courage and character will have seen what must be done if one is even to start to live the virtue-driven life that leads to blessedness.