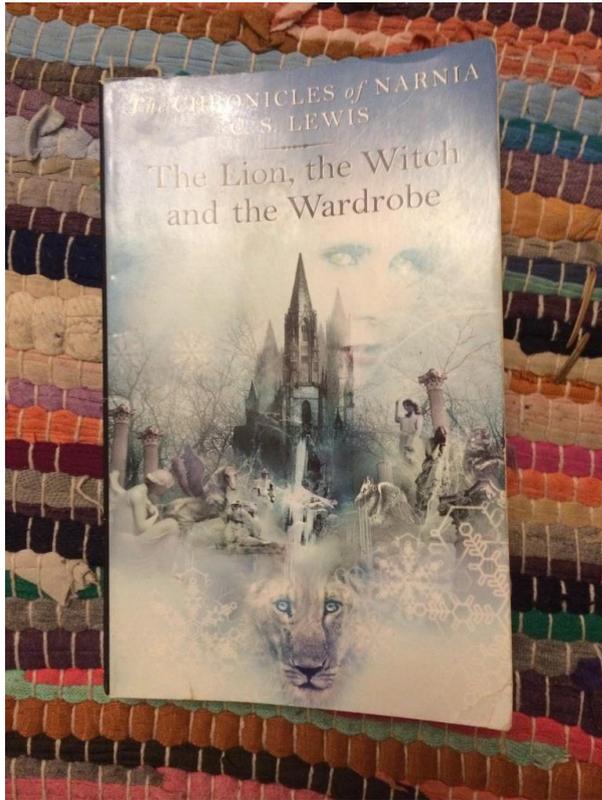


Sermon 6 December 2020 – Hannah Fytche



At Advent and Christmastime, one of my favourite books to read is this one here – can you see what it is?

It's 'The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe', the C.S. Lewis classic set in Narnia. Narnia is a land that has been enchanted and kept in an eternal winter for years and years, by an evil witch who claims to be queen.

Through a wardrobe, four children stumble into this eternal winter. On their travels, they meet some friendly characters who have been living in this cold wilderness for a long time – yet, these characters are joyful: they have never lost hope. They've held onto the promises that Aslan, the true king, will one day return and put all things to rights. Three of the children, Lucy, Peter, and Susan, choose to join their quest to find Aslan.

Along the way, they encounter a character who might be a little familiar to us – Father

Christmas! Father Christmas appears as a sign in Narnia that winter is coming to an end and that Aslan is on the move to make all things right. Father Christmas is like a prophet, a prophetic or foretelling character, someone who comes ahead of the true king to prepare the way and get the people ready.

When they meet him, Father Christmas gets Lucy, Susan, and Peter ready to meet Aslan by giving them gifts that will help them for the days ahead. He says to them: 'These are your presents, and they are tools, not toys. The time to use them is perhaps near at hand. Bear them well.'

In our Gospel reading today we also meet a prophet, a foreteller of the true king who is coming: John the Baptist. John is in a different kind of wilderness to the enchanted winter of Narnia: he's in the desert, near to the Jordan River. He lives there, wearing clothes made from camel's hair and eating a strange diet of honey and locusts – as I think some of our young people will remember from Why Group a few months ago.

John lives in the wilderness – which I imagine, somehow, to be a quiet place. A hard place but also a quiet place, where a deep, expectant silence is not unusual. I've not been in a desert wilderness like where John would have been – I think my nearest imagining or experience is like the quiet that happens on a snowy morning, when the world is still and solemn and expectant, hushed and ready for something to happen.

Into this silence, a voice cries out. Words fill the wilderness, naming and calling out that which is true and good and hopeful – speaking of the good news of Jesus who is to come.

The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem journey into the wilderness to hear this message. In the quiet they can hear one clear voice. Listening, their hearts awaken to new

wonder. They feel a thrill deep in their bones, perhaps, as they hear new and hopeful words about the coming king.

These words that they're hearing are new words – but they resonate deeply. They are new words – yet they are somehow recognisable.

They are new words, but they resonate and are recognisable because they recall and bring to life familiar promises made centuries before, about one sent from God who would come to save the world. They are words which bring to life the oldest, truest story ever told, the story of a God who loves his world so much that he would give his all, everything he has, for his creation to know and find life in him.

Hearing these words gets the people ready for meeting with Jesus. John's words call the people to repentance: he calls them to notice the ways that they have turned away from God and to ask for God's forgiveness, and he calls them to be baptised as a sign of this gift.

John's words then call the people to look towards the greater one who is coming, describing him as the one who will baptise them again: baptise them into a life where they will experience the power and presence of God's Holy Spirit with them.

Like Father Christmas in Narnia getting Peter, Susan, and Lucy ready, by giving them gifts to help them as they look for Aslan's coming, John's words of truth and promise are great gifts in the wilderness of Advent – gifts which get people ready, gifts which get *us* ready to meet with Jesus, the one greater than John – the one who is so great that John is not even worthy to untie his sandals.

So, let us be attentive to the voices calling us to look ahead to Jesus.

Let us find quiet places, wildernesses, in which we can be attentive: pockets of stillness, however short they are, discovered between the different and important demands on our time – precious pockets of stillness in which we can turn our hearts and minds completely to God.

In those places, may we be given the gift of hearing the voices calling out: the stories of prophets and promises and hope we're remembering this Advent, as we journey together towards the Day when we remember the birth of Jesus.

One way that you could find a quiet moment to listen is, perhaps, through our Advent Calendar, which you can find online every day; another is by coming here to our Jesse tree in church, and finding in the quiet of this holy place a space in which you can listen and pray.

My prayer is that we'd each find the pocket of stillness that we need this week, a quiet wilderness moment where we can be prepared for the coming of Jesus.

As I finish, let me read to you some last words from Narnia. When the three children meet Father Christmas, the prophet of Aslan, we read: 'Lucy felt running through her that deep shiver of gladness which you only get if you are being solemn and still.'

May we find that deep shiver of gladness, that expectant joy, as we turn our attention to the wilderness of this Advent season, where there is a voice calling out: prepare the way for the Lord.