

Sunday between 11<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> September [24]

Mark 8:27-38

There can be few people who have never heard of the CS Lewis books, the Chronicles of Narnia. Many of us read these books as children but reading them again as an adult has much to commend it as it offers new insight into what CS Lewis was doing with his characters in light of his own deeply held Christian faith.

Perhaps the best known character from these books is Aslan, the great lion, who is a literary representation of Jesus. In the first book, the Magician's Nephew, Aslan sings and the land of Narnia springs to life. This presence of Aslan, the Son of God, at the dawn of time is of course an imagining of John's Gospel where it opens with the words, in the beginning was the word, and the word was with God and the word was God. Aslan speaks the word so that we are under no illusion that the one who sacrifices himself in a physical encounter is the same as the one who brought the whole world into being.

In the second book, The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe, we learn a lot more about Aslan. We hear that there are prophecies from which the people take hope, and although no one has seen him, many live in hope that he will come during their lifetime and make all that is wrong in the world, right again. The children in the story, new to Narnia, who have never heard of these prophecies find it hard to believe. One refuses to listen and allies himself with the white witch, the leader of all that is evil in that world, and the other 3 are sceptical and find it hard to imagine from what they hear that they really want to meet this Aslan.

Perhaps one of the most beautiful lines in the book, and indeed a clear indication of CS Lewis' own understanding of Jesus, is when one of the children ask of Aslan, is he safe? Having just found out that he is in fact a lion. The response they get? Of course he's not safe, but he's good.

It is in similar circumstances that we find ourselves in today's gospel. Jesus himself is asking who do people say that I am, just as the children in the story were trying to get to the bottom of Aslan's personality. Jesus' disciples had all sorts of ideas about what others might be saying about him, second hand stories that built him up based on hearsay accounts of his teaching and miracles. Then Jesus asks, who do you say that I am.

Now that is an altogether different question. He asks the people who have been with him since the beginning of his ministry, the witnesses to every word publicly spoken, every deed publicly done, privy to private moments of teaching and Jesus' own pattern of prayer and devotion. Who would they say that they were following. Peter is, as usual, the first to speak, you are the Messiah, he says. Jesus doesn't want this news spread but you can only imagine that he was pleased that those closest to him were understanding what he was doing and who he was amongst them.

With this status confirmed, Jesus goes on to tell his followers what must be done, we are told he tells them quite plainly, so we can imagine it involves prophecy of the coming arrest, trial, crucifixion and death. Even if it wasn't accurately detailed it was enough to get Peter to again speak up, this time to disagree with Jesus, to insist this

was not the future he would face, to stand up and tell Jesus he would even give his own life to ensure Jesus was safe.

But of course, Jesus sees in Peter just another devilish temptation, like those in the wilderness. Peter looking to have his own way, the easy route with the happily ever after storyline is just another way to give into the world and its demands rather than being obedient to God and understanding that God knows more than we do, God's views are worth more than ours because they are complete, and trusting God with our fate because God's love for us is complete.

Some of the storylines in the chronicles of Narnia are not obviously speaking of the Christian scripture we know but others are less well disguised. In *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* there are many clear parallels. Just like in James' letter we just heard, the evil in Narnia believes in Aslan too. Faith in and of itself as the only expression of belief tells a person nothing of what lies inside the believer. The white witch believes in Aslan and his prophecies, so much so that she worked tirelessly to disrupt them, and sets herself up as an adversary of the lion. So it is with this world when people state clearly that they believe in God but their actions don't measure up to that stated belief.

How many people do we know who when talking about church life and faithful witness will chip in with that sort of assertion, Oh I believe in God, or, I'm a Christian I just don't go to Church, or, I'm a very spiritual person, I definitely believe there is something out there. That is as good ignoring God because that faith clearly hasn't changed the person enough to make them want to know God better, to be inspired to learn about or share the stirring of feelings with others perhaps more mature in their faith. Even those who oppose God do so in the knowledge that God is real enough to be worth opposing.

James is quite right, and says what Paul also said and even what Jesus himself taught, that faith in God will have practical repercussions. Paul spoke of fruits of the spirit that will be visible in the lives of those who are faithful. James tells us that faith without works tells us nothing of a person's belief and is in fact quite useless.

Jesus says any who would have faith in him, will follow him, deny themselves and take up their cross in order to make that journey. The world will keep tempting the faithful to buy into its particular views on successful living, wealth, power, possessions. But none of these things endure, none of them satisfy, in the end the object of our desires can in fact become the cause of our misery.

In C.S. Lewis' story a little boy was seduced by a small taste of Turkish delight and the promise of power, it was enough to him to turn his back on his family and ally himself with the evil one. His life was bought at the cost of the life of the great lion, Aslan, but few really knew what he sacrificed because his death was not in fact the end. We know what Jesus sacrificed, we know that his love for us was unearned and complete. How can we, with such knowledge, do nothing in response? Of course we cannot. And our actions of response, our thoughts, words and deeds, our witness is what will draw others to the gospel of hope by which we live. Each of us, by our deeds, is in fact not only responding to faith but also sharing it. May God bless your witness and use it fruitfully to draw others into his presence.