

The Lord of the Rings

by Len Hjalmarson

"Truth became legend, and legend became myth..."

So we hear in the introduction to the movie version of Tolkien's epic story. And so it is with the gospel. The truth has become legend, and then myth, and finally mere stories we tell our children. The words have lost their power.

What gives words their meaning, and what gives meaning its power?

In a world where we are flooded with words, and where even symbols no longer have meaning, how can we touch the truth that words represent? Has a deeper narrative been lost behind the Story? This may seem like a question for philosophers, irrelevant in our day to day lives. But I submit it has never been more relevant. Perhaps on Sunday morning we hear the old story... we've heard it a thousand times.. but we know it well. The words are familiar. The story is worn and faded. And the meaning? Often the speaker does not know. He or she may think they know.. but they only know the words. The Story has never really touched them. As one poet has written, "Those who know don't have the words to tell, and those with the words don't know too well..." -Bruce Cockburn, "Burden of the Angel Beast"

I don't believe we see the depths to which we have fallen. Perception, after all, is shaped by our collective reality. True perception requires perspective: it's why God made us with two eyes. With a single eye, we see only the flat surface of things. We are unable to judge relative depth. In the same way, how do we see relative significance? How can we discern which is the important truth? All truth has faded and become flat. This is one of the things we mean by relativism. We have this set of propositions, and that one. Who can argue that one is better, or "more true," than another?

But worse, truth has become personal. Now there is a paradox! If truth is not personal, it is irrelevant. But when truth is only personal, when we finally reach solipsism, when individualism and solipsism reign, we are in the final resting place of relativism. Events no longer have meaning, there is no more "as above, so below." Earthly reality is not anchored in a greater reality.

In popular thought, the alternative is awful: perhaps, Theocracy, which we know has never worked in this world, and has indeed led to patriarchy and terrible abuse of power. So, in the name of tolerance and brotherhood and perhaps even "truth," it doesn't matter what one believes in this world. Even service and sacrifice are outdated concepts.

When we reach this place, the night when all cats are gray, we may still know passion, but it is twisted and distorted. We are passionate about everything except the things that matter. Passion itself has no point of reference. Indeed, in his essay on Story, Tolkien wrote,

..."There is need of renewal and return... [not to] seeing things as they are, and this involve myself with philosophers, though I might venture to say "seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them – as things apart from ourselves. There is a need to clean the windows; so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity – from possessiveness." *On Fairy Stories*

TRUTH AND STORY

"Wait a minute," I hear you say. "What does all this have to do with *The Lord of the Rings*?"

Years ago I was reading in Lewis or in Chesterton when I came across a discussion on story. The writer was obviously familiar with words, but I don't mean the passing and easy familiarity we have because after all we all use words.

This part is difficult to explain.

There is one familiarity of a fish with water. Can you imagine being more comfortable in it? But that type of familiarity is immunity. The fish doesn't even realize that it's world is watery. I believe we have reached the same place with regard to words. But worse.. much worse, I fear... because we are the fish with regard to words, so we are the fish with regard to meaning and truth.

What hope is there for us? How can words again be invested with meaning and with power? Even those of us who have an inkling of their power are sick of words. Perhaps the hope is in story.

THE BIRTH OF THE AINUR

Many who read this don't know the meaning of the word "Ainur." And yet, doesn't it thrill you? Isn't the very fact of its shadowed meaning part of its power?

Tolkien, you may know, was a philologist. His special area of study was language. It is said that he had created four or five of them by the time he was eight years old. His gift was.. wait for it.. the word. Now doesn't that have a ring to it? It should jolt your understanding with deep meaning. Now we are talking on two levels of meaning, words, and the Word, and yet the two are connected.

Tolkien's epic tale is remarkable. More than this, it is of mythic proportions. The tale embodies truth in a story form, and it embodies it in such depth that it has unusual power. It reaches to deeper truth. It borders on transcendence. As I left the theater, I realized that I did not feel terrified. I did not feel thrilled... exactly. I felt a sense of wonder. I was in awe. I felt a longing in my spirit for... for what? For beauty, and for truth... for a true word.

"If you want to build a ship, don't drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work, and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea." - Antoine de Saint Exupery

The Lord of the Rings is a work of art. But there are many works of art. Again, like the fish in water, we are buried in so called "art," and art no longer has any connection to Truth.

No, *The Lord of the Rings* is more than art. It embodies a terrible beauty. Ah.. now there are two words that, joined together, still hold some power for us.

THE WORD WITH POWER

In the very beginning there was Eru, the One, who dwelt in the Void, and whose name in Elvish was Iluvatar. Words came forth from Iluvatar to which he gave life through the Flame Imperishable and he named these creations the Ainur.

Imagine a time when words held power; when every word spoken was a true word. Imagine a time when the spoken word took form, and light was formed in darkness—now there is a paradigm for creation, and so for art. But more than this... it is a paradigm for incarnation. "The word became flesh and dwelt among us... full of grace and truth." But now we are no longer talking about ordinary words; we are walking on holy ground. How is it that such truth comes to us in the form of stories? It's almost ridiculous.

The Gospel is essentially stories about a man who lived two thousand years ago. But not just any man. Those who read these stories and letters find that they have a quality about them unlike any other stories. They have the quality of ultimate truth. They have a terrible beauty.

To many *The Lord of the Rings* is a dark story. It is filled with violence. There are dark and twisted creatures, who do evil things. There are sorcerers who dabble in the powers of Satan. There are demons and demon-spawn. Honestly, the movie itself captures this darkness. I was impressed that the Director does not dwell needlessly in those places. The movie could easily have played on the horror of the story. It could have been filled with blood. I found it almost restrained.

Now consider the Gospel story. "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." Perspective. Contrast. Reality. The light never looks so bright but when the night is darkest. The power of Tolkien's story is difficult for we who live in such sheltered times. Perhaps it would be more easily heard in Afghanistan or in Moscow. What do we in the west know of darkness and suffering? Only war veterans really know the horror of battle, and the brightness of courage, honor, and sacrifice. We are far divorced from the world of the warrior. We don't know what to do with warriors anymore, and warrior energy is all but lost to us.

"When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi." Matthew 2:16

It's a lovely story to tell to children in Sunday school, right?

The world of the New Testament is a dark world. Imagine the scene... soldiers racing through the streets, knocking on doors and seizing infants. Soldiers, in Roman armor with swords drawn, knocking down mothers, cutting down fathers, breaking down doors... blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke.

In our introduction to the story of Jesus strange words are being spoken, and beings of light are appearing to young women and old men. Babies are being murdered by an oppressive army. Jesus didn't come into some mythical, storybook land of light and joy, but into a real world of pain, darkness and horror. We have whitewashed that world, even as Disneyland and the cosmetics industry mask reality in our own world.

What have we lost, in sanitizing the Gospel and in decking up the scene of the incarnation with candles and lights and soft music? We have lost the shock of it all. We have lost the stench of cow manure, the blood of birth. We have lost Herod and the soldiers. Perhaps we have even lost the shepherds of that chill Bethlehem morning. These ones, after all, were not the well dressed 12 year olds of our Christmas theatre, but were likely unwashed, uncouth common fellows, closer to the types we would find sleeping on a grate on a winter's night downtown.

And maybe we have lost the wise men. These weren't Jewish leaders come to worship the baby king, theologically trained scholars who knew what was up, or church elders with some connection to reality, but pagan astrologers and gentiles at that. But if we have lost all these, we have lost the meaning of the birth itself. If we have lost the dark world of Jesus, we have lost the hope of His coming.

SHADOWS OF THE TRUE

Thus Eru, the One, whom the Earthborn know as Iluvatar, created the fairest race that ever was made, and the wisest. Iluvatar declared that the Elves would have and make more beauty than any earthly creatures, and they would possess the greatest happiness and deepest sorrow.

As the credits began to roll after *The Lord of the Rings*, what struck me was not that I had seen great violence or great evil, although I had seen both. What struck me was not that I had seen great beauty and impressive vistas, though the sets were beautiful and the cinematography was excellent. I was impressed by courage in the face of great danger. I was impressed by sacrifice in the face of impossible odds. I was impressed by ... I struggle for words here... a sense of a deeper truth... intimations of immortality...

In the halls of Elrond, I remembered a deeper beauty. Amidst the trees of Lothlorien, I longed for rest. In the mines of Moria, I wanted to fight with Gandalf. Though the forces of evil pressed heavily, the light shone in the darkness. It is thrilling, inspiring, and an icon of the true. The film, like the story, embodies a terrible beauty.

Again, those two words juxtaposed. How can terror be beautiful, and beauty terrifying? We think we know something of beauty and of terror. We know nothing. We have only encountered the shadows of these things. Many years ago, CS Lewis wrote:

“You asked for a loving God: you have one. The great spirit you so lightly invoked, the ‘lord of terrible aspect’ is present: not a senile benevolence that drowsily wishes you to be happy in your own way, not the cold philanthropy of a conscientious magistrate, nor the care of a host who feels responsible for the comfort of his guests, but the consuming fire Himself, the Love that made the worlds, persistent as the artist’s love for his work and despotic as a man’s love for a dog, provident and venerable as a father’s love for a child, jealous, inexorable, exacting as love between the sexes.”

- CS Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*

Perhaps the greatest offence of *The Lord of the Rings* is that while evil is clearly evil, good hardly knows itself. Faramir wavers on the edge of the knife, and finally falls to the dark side. We admire Frodo’s courage, who knows what he faces yet moves forward anyway—but it isn’t the courage of Aragorn. And Aragorn is the returning king, but he is plagued by doubts. Isildur was his own father, who fell prey to the power of the Ring and gave a foothold for the Dark Lord to regain his strength in Middle Earth.

What happened to the hero who knows himself and boldly goes where no man has gone before? What happened to that clarity of purpose and vision that built the great kingdoms in the first place? Well, maybe it never really existed. Maybe the path to the city of crystal is through the fields of doubt. Maybe Abraham is a better type, leaving Ur behind for a city he has not seen. We can identify with Aragorn in his self-doubt, and it’s reassuring. It’s the blazing certainty of fanaticism that brings us the Bin Ladens of the world.

The answers don’t arrive with blazing clarity in a forty-minute sermon. Even Gandalf doesn’t know the path. Certainly the ring can be destroyed, but it isn’t likely that the Ring can be carried safely to the fires of Mordor. And if it is destroyed, it isn’t clear what will happen to Middle Earth. Much will be lost either way. The Elves will return to the west, or fade away.

But what kind of story is this, where the resolution is in question and the solution will take months to work out? In our world of quick solutions where MHz gives way to GHz, in our world of the 30-second infomercial, give me solutions or give me death! Even three hours doesn’t bring us resolution in *The Lord of the Rings*. I like that. It rings true to my experience. Eugene Peterson writes,

"The secularized mind is terrorized by mysteries. Thus it makes lists, labels people, assigns roles, and solves problems. But a solved life is a reduced life. These tightly buttoned-up people never take great faith risks or make convincing love talk. They deny or ignore the mysteries and diminish human existence to what can be managed, controlled, and fixed. We live in a cult of experts who explain and solve. The vast technological apparatus around us gives the impression that there is a tool for everything if we can only afford it. Pastors cast in the role of spiritual technologists are hard put to keep that role from absorbing everything else, since there are so many things that need to be and can, in fact, be fixed."

"But ‘there are things,’ wrote Marianne Moore, ‘that are important beyond all this fiddle.’ The old time guide of souls asserts the priority of the "beyond" over "this fiddle." Who is available for this kind of work other than pastors? A few poets, maybe; and children, always. But children are not good guides, and most of the poets have lost interest in God. That leaves pastors as guides through the mysteries." *The Contemplative Pastor*

So Jesus enters the world of Herod and the wise men, soldiers and angels. From the beginning his life is threatened. He survives only to hang on a Roman cross, his followers scattered. His passion is witnessed by all, his resurrection by a woman, not even a legal witness in that time.

But something happens between Friday evening and Monday morning. Something happens that transforms the cowering followers into bold lions. Something happens that turns the first century world

upside down. That Something is the stuff of myth and legend, though now it seems best told in tales to small children, sanitized for the purpose.

THE END IN THE BEGINNING

I started by talking about my experience in viewing *The Lord of the Rings*.

If the truth of the gospel became legend, and legend became myth, how do we recover the real Story? What gives words their meaning, and what gives meaning its power?

In a world where we are flooded with words, and where even symbols no longer have meaning, how can we touch the truth that words represent?

“The only way to propagate a message is to live it.”

-Jim Wallis

“Preach the gospel at all times; if necessary, use words.”

-St. Francis

We touch the truth in lives that have themselves been touched and transformed by it. Real stories are personal and incarnate... lived. This is not an answer for philosophers, who enjoy words, and will bury you in them. This is an answer for warriors and kings, those ready for adventure and not afraid of the path, though it leads through Mordor.

“Sometimes the best path will not guide you
You can't see what's round the bend;
Sometimes the road leads through dark places
Sometimes the darkness is your friend.

Today these eyes scan bleached-out lands
For the coming of the out-bound stage;
Pacing the cage; pacing the cage.”

-Bruce Cockburn

CONCLUSION: TRUTH AND FANTASY

“The Son of God was born into the world, not as a prince, but as a pauper. So, to deck up the legendary scene of his nativity with precious hangings, pictures, glittering lamps and other ornamentation, is to destroy whatever valid symbolism it might otherwise have had. Truly, we human beings have a wonderful faculty for thus snatching fantasy from the jaws of truth.”

-Malcolm Muggeridge

“But,” some will object, “Why not just tell the story? Such a great writer as Tolkien should have devoted his life to theology, or preaching, or some more Christian venture. After all, he wasn't even writing about things that were *true*.” But that is precisely my point. We can't talk about the true things unless we recover the myths. Our words have lost their power.

And the best myths are the ones we know not to be true. The others might be confused for reality, and then we would truly be lost. Tolkien himself makes this point in his work on Story:

“Creative fantasy is founded upon the hard recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun; on a recognition of reality, but not a slavery to it. So upon logic was founded the nonsense that displays itself in the tales and rhymes of Lewis Carroll. If men could really not distinguish between frogs and men... fairy stories about frog kings could not have arisen.”

-JRR Tolkien, *On Fairy Stories*

On the other hand, when the truth is buried in the accretions of centuries, when the traditions of men walk hand in hand with the simple truth of the gospel, when the fact is equated to the story and the king has no clothes, it takes a child to declare the truth, and expose the naked reality.

And so story becomes the vehicle for the recovery of truth. And the lowly story, like little Frodo, can go where our "powerful" words dare not tread.

"Wisdom dealt with mortal powers,
Where truth in closest words shall fail,
When truth embodied in a tale
Shall enter in at lowly doors."
-Tennyson, "In Memoriam"

Wisdom is vindicated by her children. The foolishness of story travels where truth may not dwell. Isn't this so like the gospel, foolishness to the Greeks, but the wisdom of God to those who are being saved.



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* www.nextreformation.com