



THE SONG OF ALL CREATION

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"The world has been disenchanted." This is a sentiment first voiced by Max Weber in 1918. Nothing since has been able to convince the world otherwise. There is, however, an increasing awareness that a disenchanted world is less than desirable. We want elves, orcs, wizards, and demons. We want magic.

This is an observation that can easily be made by looking at how we entertain ourselves. Movies, books, gaming, and more point towards a cultural appetite for fantasy. It is well-suited to a world in which much of our time is spent in front of a screen. You're never more than a few clicks away from Middle Earth.

What we fail to understand is that the life of Middle Earth (and any other well-crafted fantasy) is as far-removed from entertainment as possible. In Middle Earth, fighting dragons is not a form of entertainment – it is a matter of life or death. In the well-supplied world of modernity, we take life itself for granted, its only real problem being that it's boring. All of our dragons are in books, movies, or games. Indeed, such distractions easily serve to help us ignore the true dragons that lurk in the heart.

It is interesting that Lewis and Tolkien, two writers who wrote brilliantly in fantastic fiction, both shared the common experience of the trench warfare of World War I. The brutality and futility of that war are beyond description. Some 20 million perished in its maw. Lewis was grievously wounded by shrapnel in the leg and abdomen. Both men lost their best friends and a large part of their generation in the struggle. At its end, there was no great sense of accomplishment – only a relief that it had ceased. Two decades later, the battles would begin again.

What is quite certain is that neither Lewis nor Tolkien saw themselves as entertainers. I suspect both would have been loath to have seen their work taken up by Hollywood. And though both clearly had children in mind as they wrote, they would have seen such story-telling as a very serious business.

G.K. Chesterton offered this observation:

Fairy tales do not give the child his first idea of bogey. What fairy tales give the child is his first clear idea of the possible defeat of bogey. The baby has known the dragon intimately ever since he had an imagination. What the fairy tale provides for him is a St. George to kill the dragon [G.K. Chesterton, writing the original lines, in *Tremendous Trifles*, Book XVII: *The*

Red Angel (1909)].

From within Orthodoxy, it is possible to say that the world is more than enchanted. It is magical and wonderful, as well as dangerous and deadly. All of us will die at its hand.

The difficulty with a materialist account of reality is its total indifference to every form and instance of suffering as well as its emptiness of meaning (perhaps the greatest suffering of all). It is little wonder that entertainment (as a form of escape) is such a strong feature of our culture. It assuages the boredom of an empty world.

The classical Christian witness, though, is that the world is not empty. It is filled with a depth of meaning and witness, of presence and signification. As clearly as we are wired for hunger, for fear, for sight and sound, so we are wired for transcendence. Without it, our lives begin to shrink and we fail to thrive.

C.S. Lewis once said that it would be strange to find a creature with an instinctive thirst that lived on a planet without water. It seems clear from the evidence (including the Biblical evidence) that human beings were late in coming to believe in the One God. But we have no evidence of human beings without transcendence. It is only in our very latest years that so many of us have come to despair of anything beyond ourselves. And so we turn to fantasy of the most empty kind. One whose very emptiness and make-believe can only deepen our despair by its lack of substance.

I recall my first exposure to Tolkien and Lewis. The books amazed me, not because they suggested a world of fantasy that I could enjoy. Rather, it was the amazement of realizing that someone else had sensed something that I already knew was true. And I knew that they knew it as well or they could not have written in such a common language.

There has only ever been *one door* in all of history that truly mattered: the door of Christ's Empty Tomb. It is that place where that which was hidden beneath and within showed forth into what is present and clear. The meaning of all things (the Logos) revealed Himself and spoke with us. If we saw Him then, or see Him now, then we are not wrong to see Him in every tree, rock, and cloud – in all created things.

St. Paul is among those who saw Him. Of Him, he said this:

All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist. (Col. 1:16-17)

St. John who also saw Him, handled Him, and heard Him speak, said this:

All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it. (John 1:4-5)

The world is enchanted, but with a Magic deeper than our fantasies. In every individual, the drama of the Nativity, Holy Week, and Pascha are re-enacted, re-lived. We are baptized "into the death of Christ," and "raised in the likeness of His resurrection." Each moment of our existence is the life of Christ. St. Paul described it, "Christ within us, the hope of glory."

Modern culture may indeed have become "disenchanted." It represents a cultural amnesia, a forgetting of the fulness of our humanity. When we become lost in our entertainments, we become prisoners of the passions and seemingly immune to true wonder. The passions are an easy mark for a culture lost in commerce. Nonetheless, there remains within us a quiet suspicion that there is more to the world than meets the pocketbook. That suspicion, along and along, can blossom into faith when doors are opened, or we perceive the One Door that truly matters reflected in the world around us.

Within all things, there is the quiet hymn, "Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death and upon those in the tombs bestowing life..."

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Featured: Creation of the World, Stammheim Missal, ca. 1170.
