

Proper 10B July 15, 2018

Perspective

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Of all the many quotes attributed to C. S. Lewis, one of the 20th Century's leading Christian apologists, one of my favorites comes from his Narnia story called *The Magician's Nephew*, the story of two children – a boy and a girl – who are forced into other world by the boy's Uncle Andrew, a man who fancied himself someone of superior intelligence, class, and a gifted magician but was in reality in over his head messing with powers he neither understood nor respected. *The Magician's Nephew* is known among fans of Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia – the 7 book series of stories about how children from our world have adventures in another world of Lewis's imagination where they learn about and grow closer to Aslan, who is in fact the same Jesus we know in our world - as the story where Narnia begins, where the Lion Aslan sings all of Narnia into existence. But there is a good deal of adventure beforehand, where we learn about other worlds and the boy's uncle is revealed as a sort of pompous fool who ends up blundering into Narnia, along with the children and some other people from our world, just before Narnia came to be.

As Aslan sings Narnia into being, creating the sun, moon, stars, land, water, trees, and animals, the children and adults watch and listen to Aslan's song despite interruptions from the boy's inconsiderate Uncle. And while the children see the wonder and beauty of the new world, Uncle Andrew, although he was in the exact same place, had a different experience. That is where my favorite quote comes in: "What you see and hear depends a great deal on where you are standing, it also depends on what sort of person you are."

Lewis goes on to explain Uncle Andrew had heard the music of the Lion's song and didn't like how it made him feel, so when he saw the song was coming from a Lion, he convinced himself he never heard music, only the roar of a beast. And since Uncle Andrew didn't like animals, was afraid of them, and had used them for his cruel experiments in magic, his perception of Aslan got worse. And as more animals sprang from the earth while Aslan sang, Uncle Andrew grew more frightened and all he saw was a bunch of savage wild animals milling around looking for him, desiring to charge after him and all he heard was a lot of frightening roars. In other words, as Aslan created life, all Uncle Andrew saw was a threat to his own safety and life. That is where my next favorite quote from C. S. Lewis comes in: "The trouble about trying to make yourself stupider than you really are, is that you very often succeed."

After witnessing the wonder and beauty and power of the creation of a new world, Uncle Andrew saw neither wonder nor beauty, but he did recognize power that might result in growing some money trees if he planted money in the new ground, and was terribly afraid the wild animals that seemed to be everywhere and his selfish nephew would get in his way. He missed the point of Narnia entirely, and never got to know or see Aslan for who he is. Of Uncle Andrew, Aslan commented, "Oh, Adam's Sons, (that is what humans are called in Narnia), how cleverly you defend yourselves against all that might do you good."

C.S. Lewis' very human character Uncle Andrew, a man who was not as competent as he saw himself, a man grasping to be more than he was, a selfish man who saw people and places and events through the very ego-centric lens of benefit or threat to himself, reminds me a great deal of the man at the center of today's Gospel reading: Herod Antipas, a ruler not to be confused with his father, Herod the Great. A brief scan of history will reveal historians give far more attention to the contributions of the father than to his youngest son, but it is the son who had the most talked about birthday party in history.

Artists, playwrights, poets, movie makers, and entertainers throughout history have contributed to how we see and understand the events of Herod's birthday party. Each has his own lens through which he views or interprets the events of that party, and what led up to them. But they are all pretty much the same story of sex and violence that are the same tired tropes of most summer action adventure movies. While the original text does mention the violence of beheading John the Baptist, there is no evidence to support the famous strip tease dancing artists like to attribute to this story. But like the summer blockbusters prove, sex and violence sell better.

Sex and violence can also distract us from the points the author of Mark's Gospel might have been trying to make in today's periscope. It's worth taking a moment to step back and notice what is missing from today's Gospel lesson: Jesus. This is not a story about Jesus. It's a story about the court of a man who fancies himself king, but is really just a tetrarch, a man ruling a small part of a kingdom. He was never given the title of king. Yet he obviously saw himself as someone above the law, partied like a king, and made a promise to give up to half his kingdom, when he didn't have a kingdom because he wasn't a king. But perhaps he wanted to be as important as a king.

The only place Jesus shows up in today's Gospel, is in the very beginning, where we heard news was spreading about Jesus, about the amazing things he did and said, and word had gotten to Herod Antipas. Jesus was the topic of gossip, and everyone seemed to be wondering who he really was: Elijah? Some other Old Testament prophet? Or a revived John the Baptist?

Notice none of the options is that God is up to something new in Jesus. No one saw the Messiah promised by God in Jesus. Herod didn't either. Not unlike the selfish perspective of Uncle Andrew from *The Magician's Nephew*, when Herod heard of acts of power he seems to have seen himself.

Many folks would disagree with such a perspective. They might say Herod believed Jesus was John the Baptist because he felt guilty about listening to his evil wife and seductive step-daughter and wanted John to be alive because that would look like redemption, making the wrong act he did right. But I'm not sure such humility or repentance fits with the Herod we saw in the story. Herod had heard John the Baptist's criticism, which was as political as it was religious, and might not have been as offended like his wife, but seemed to find it entertaining. Like listening to a song for the music and ignoring lyrics that have a message. Maybe he had just liked that John the Baptist was talking about him, and getting a lot of attention for doing so. You know what they say about publicity, right, any publicity, even bad publicity, is publicity. And like Aslan said, it would also be a clever defense against something that might do him good.

We won't see Herod again in Mark's Gospel. If he truly felt John was raised, making his wrong action right, he did not step up and speak for Jesus at his trial after Jesus was arrested. He didn't prevent Jesus' crucifixion. Which is why I am inclined to think when Herod heard about Jesus bringing wholeness and life to people, Herod saw himself and believed Jesus' deeds of God's love were really a now new and powerful John the Baptist made possible by his execution of John making Herod a sort of hero contributor; despite the reality that Herod's actions were nothing more than mercilessly murdering an innocent man. Which might be something else the author of Mark wants us to see, Mark might have used this story to remind readers of his Gospel of Jesus' own crucifixion and resurrection.

Perhaps another point the author of Mark's gospel is trying to make is we cannot control the perceptions of people. That even if we all see the exact same event, we might not see the exact same thing. For what we see and hear depends a great deal on where we are standing, and it depends on what sort of person we are. Some might see a strong leader in the same person others see as weak. Some might see exciting, positive possibilities in a new ministry, like our new coffee shop ministry, while others see a threat to our building or safety in that same new ministry. When

we come across differences in perspective like these, I believe it is important to remember to pause and examine where our own perspective comes from, listen to the reason for the perspective of someone else, and all of us try to turn – as our Presiding Bishop has challenged us to do – turn to Jesus and not let our perspectives become more important than the work Jesus is calling us to do: to bring God’s love to all people. Engaging in such prayerful work can lead to growing closer to God, to each other and might even change our perspective to recognize God present, here and now, in our worship, in the sacraments, in our music, in our ministries old and new, and in each other.