

Harry Potter meets Rowan Williams

A sermon preached by Robert Cotton
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Two books of essential reading. On my left hand is Rowan Williams' latest book 'Tokens of Trust', 160 pages, £8, an exploration of the Apostles' Creed, first offered as Holy Week meditations in Canterbury Cathedral. I can't understand a word he's saying in most of his books, but this one is easy and is trustworthy and is definitely worth reading. And this book on my right hand, the end of a large series, Harry Potter 7, 600 pages, cheap wherever you buy it, the final book, and I would say *essential* reading – not necessarily meaning you have to read it, but it is reading of the *essence*. It is not a religious book but I am even more convinced now that having read the whole series, the structure of the stories from page 1 volume 1 to page 600 volume 7 is founded on the *essence*, the being, the heart of the Christian faith. And as well as these two we have the Gospel reading: Jesus' strong words telling us what is involved in being a disciple.

But let us begin with the Archbishop of Canterbury who says basic to everything is the idea that the Christian belief is really about knowing who and what to trust. The word that begins the Creed 'I believe' actually comes from the Greek word which can mean 'Believe' but is equally validly translated as 'I trust'. In the West we have too often located it up here in our heads – belief is what we think about – but in all this book Rowan is exploring what is involved in trusting in God. He says it is quite like what the Buddhists say when they declare their faith: 'I take refuge in the Buddha, the Buddha is where I belong, the Buddha is what I have confidence in to keep me safe'. Rowan is not dismissing that there are real intellectual questions to face but he is not dealing with it here. He is saying we need to identify what we have trust in. We need to go and find who we trust and then we need to nourish that attitude. And if that is the purpose of Rowan's book, I think this message is also found in Harry Potter, and it is also true of the Gospel reading. Jesus and J K Rowling are saying 'Where does your heart lie? In what direction do you face? Where do you see the most basic evidence of the meaning of life and follow it?' But as well as developing the attitude, there is the *consequence* of the attitude. That's what Jesus is saying. There is no point just being a Disciple without considering what is involved in being a disciple. Throughout the series Harry Potter has been exploring what it means to follow in a certain way, and as the series has gone on and become darker and darker it has more and more been about 'if you are a true disciple, conflict will come your way'.

I've noticed recently having read these two books over the summer, one of the gaps in both of the books. In some ways they are both about conflict and discipleship; what they are not about is conversion. Surely, you would say, this is very important for the Christian faith. People we are told ought to be converted to become believers. There is nothing in either book about changing our fundamental decision, going from one choice

to another. This is very relevant to the church both as we think about people taking on the faith but also about what happens when people drift away – fundamental choices can change. And it particularly relevant at the moment because one of the strongest challenges to the Christian faith certainly in our country at the moment is coming from Professor Dawkins who is wanting to challenge and convert people out of a religious attitude to a scientific one. There is nothing here in these 2 books about that. Nevertheless these essential books are saying ‘Where does your heart lie? What direction are you going in? Do you feel the faith? Do you know where you trust and what is involved in that?’

So, that topic is largely what Rowan is describing, Harry Potter picks up on it and in this particular volume Rowling is exploring one of the main difficulties that lie with this choice, this fundamental choice, and that is - that we often don’t have enough evidence. What happens when we *have to* make the fundamental choice but the evidence, the knowledge that we want, is simply not fully there?

Dumbledore is the Head, the one you’re probably heard of even if you haven’t read the books, the Father-figure, the Mentor, the patron saint for Harry. But in this book we start to find stories about him in his younger days that make us see him in a different light. He is not all good. And one of the things Harry is exploring is here, ‘Can I still place my trust in someone who has feet of clay?’ And more than that, because the last 3 books Harry has been on a journey, he has received a vocation, a calling to follow a certain path, to achieve an end. And now he starts to realise that Dumbledore did not give him the resources, the tools with which to achieve that. Can I any longer not only trust my mentor but follow my vocation when I don’t have the evidence and the resources I need? That’s not just a matter of teenage angst. That is part of the pain of the human condition and Jesus refers to it in the Gospel story as well.

Jesus says: OK, you’re going to war and you’re the King, you’ve got to think ‘Have I got enough of an army to win?’ Or you’re the business man building the tower, ‘Have I got enough resources to finish the project?’ Those are the fundamental questions you have to ask; but if you listen carefully to Jesus’ story it’s not simple - as though you ask the questions, gather all the evidence you want and then you go about choosing. Life is not that simple. Surely you must have sat in a meeting sometimes tussling with a fundamental decision and suddenly someone says ‘But can we afford to do it?’ To which the quip also comes ‘And can we afford not to do it?’ And so often that is where we are: that actually the evidence is ambiguous, incomplete, yet nevertheless we have to decide who and what to trust.

So Rowan, Harry and Jesus are all pointing us towards these fundamental decisions. But there is a warning, that comes in this book, that says ‘Remember that this decision you are making about the direction, focus and vocation in your life is about (although Rowling does not call it this) is about *God* – BUT it is not about *each other*.’ To some extent this is one of the key explorations in this volume – which is familiar to us as the mistake of the fundamentalists, who, having made their decision about God, apply that decision to their neighbour. This is to say ‘I believe in this sort of God’ and therefore

those who do so as well as everyone else is not. But that is to mistake the decision you're required to make. Harry has to explore 'Do I support Dumbledore or not. But that is just the basic question, and a bit like Daniel Radcliffe's acting it is pretty basic. It is in the side characters where there is the exploration of ambivalence: Where does your heart truly lie? And how do you treat those who have a different answer to that question? Snape, the Professor who has through 7 volumes detested Harry, actually has been the one who has protected him. How often have you met people like that who seem to protect the things that they detest! Or, without giving too much away in case you haven't yet read it, Wormtail, the rat, literally and metaphorically, the rat who nevertheless when Harry is in prison gives 'one unconscious impulse of mercy'. It brings about his death, but he is the one who frees Harry. Or Narcissa towards the end, (Narcissa, the one who makes Cruella De Vil look like a Sunday School teacher, she is the one who at the crucial moment cannot get rid of the fondness in her heart and enables Harry to fight the last battle.

As Christians, we are the ones who believe in original sin *and* original blessing, and we mustn't deny either of those. And that applies to all of us all the time. So Jesus says you cannot be my disciple unless you hate your father, mother, wife, children, brother, sister. Those are the words in the Gospel. We need to remember that the Hebrew that Jesus spoke is a very basic language. They simply did not have words for 'prefer'. They certainly did not have words for 'There is a fundamental decision and you need to decide whether you place God first or other things first. But having made that decision, having decided for the God you believe in, then actually loving the people around you may be your way of fulfilling that decision'. They simply did not have the words for that. And Jesus is saying 'Make the choice', but you know full well that sometimes loving your enemies is not a mistake, but is part of your salvation.

I am more and more convinced that there is plenty of the basic teaching of the Christian faith in all the Harry Potter series. Now is not the time to go through it all, but here are 2 examples: there is a lovely meditation throughout this book on the nature of Remorse. There is a character who through sin has torn his soul in two or more. That is part of what sin does, it fractures us at the heart of our being. And it is not forgiveness that is needed but remorse. Remorse is part of what is involved when a soul is reunited with itself. It is not about God's forgiveness but about 'Can this person bear to own up to himself, the fracture that he has caused to himself and what is involved in a soul being reunited. A beautiful meditation on remorse. Secondly, at the heart of this book, the moment of great sacrifice. And what is the title of the chapter that follows the moment of great sacrifice? A chapter that is ethereal, mystical, a bit like the Book of Revelation, very hard to understand. The chapter is simply called Kings Cross. Rowling knows as we know, as the Church has known for centuries, that we don't fully understand what happened in our moment of great sacrifice, of Christ on the cross, but what we do know is that afterwards, things are different.

And so it is over. 10 years of writing and the series is ended. But I will finish with 2 quotations that I used during our choir tour in Norwich, coming from the works of Julian of Norwich, that great saint, who said "God says to us 'I did not promise that you would

not be tempest; I did promise that you would not be overcome.” She also said, “And all shall be well, all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well”. Two great affirmations: that although there is conflict in life, nevertheless if we put our trust in God, we will not be overcome, because in the end all shall be well. This series of 7 books is a romantic journey exploring what is involved in courage and friendship and learning to place our trust in what is good. And on this journey Harry is not just “the boy who survived”, but the one who has learned, the one who has been on the way, the disciple. And the last words of this book and all this series “All was well”.

Amen