

14 November 2021

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Silmarillion* begins, as many legends do, with a mythical account of creation.

Myths are not firmly grasped truths that are then turned into stories. Those would be allegories. Myths are more like deeply intuited truths demanding to be told.

But because the truths are so deep as to be almost unsayable, they ought not to be controlled by our 'higher' rational faculties (so-called). They must erupt from below and emerge in images and stories.

Such truths are never 'grasped'. They're revealed in representations – pictures, stories, symbols – that we can only experience, imagine, and re-imagine. Our higher rational powers must receive them humbly, allow them to do their work on us, and not dissect the life out of them.

Enchantment's Recovery

Tolkien had an intimate acquaintance with this way of thinking and imagining. He knew that, without it, real religion dies – or worse, it decays into atheistic literalism, scientific dogmatism, and/or fanatical fundamentalism. All three are empty of humility because each is filled with its own brand of false certainty. They're almost always didactic and moralistic in the very worst sense of those words.

The creation myth in *The Silmarillion* imagines angelic beings singing the creation into being. It's an extraordinarily beautiful idea, and Tolkien does justice to it. But the idea did not begin with him, as he'd have been the first to admit.

We're already familiar, from opening pages of the Book of Genesis, with the mythical image of God speaking something into being. We experience this truth in a second-hand way when we make something happen by speaking our own words, not just to make noises, but to communicate something.

We often want our communications to *do* something, too, to have some effect in the world, even if it's only the effect that comes with being understood. Beyond that, though, we command, plead, beg, request...and lo, something happens! When we say, "I'm sorry, I renounce, I declare, I forgive..." we create new worlds of new possibilities to live in. Sometimes.

Over time, the mythical moment when God spoke creation into being was embellished, extended, and re-imagined. Perhaps God didn't just speak his Word, and lo, there was light, earth, and life. Perhaps God *sang* his Word into being. Perhaps the creation is more like a long, complex, piece of orchestral music than a feat of mechanical engineering.

If we imagine God singing creation into being, then creation is, even now, being sustained and held in being by his 'Spirit', the breath that carries God's sound and meaning.

This reminds me of something important I read long ago in the work of a massively intelligent medieval thinker, St Thomas Aquinas. He did not believe that God gave creation its existence at a single point in time, and then, forever after, creation has its life and being 'all on its own', as it were, in the way a table carries on existing on *its* own, long after the carpenter has made it.

St Thomas thought creation – including us – depends constantly and forever on the gift of God's will. For us to exist continually, God continually wills us into being. God chooses to give us life and being in every microsecond of time. And if God ever ceased to do this, creation would instantly collapse back into nothingness.

So, it's as though God is singing us into being, not just 'back then', but right now, in this moment, always, forever breathing out and holding the note that each of us is, making a great chorus of all things. Even now.

Doesn't this myth restore our enchantment with the world all around us? We lost this enchantment at the time of the enlightenment, and we've never recovered it. And religion in the enlightened Western world has never recovered from that loss.

To chant is to sing, not say, our words. This still happens in Churches, but not in many other places. And Presbyterians, to their shame, are prone to sneering at it.

'Chant' is yet another one of those words that the English borrowed from the French, but never paid for. It's from *chanter*, 'to sing'. Tolkien might say, as I would, that the world's enchantment is its realisation in song.

We experience this truth, too, in a second-hand way. Every song is its own small world, and it's brought into being whenever we sing it. More than that, it's brought to *life* when we sing it. For it takes a large lungful of breath, our very 'spirit', to sing. And 'Spirit' in the breath that breathed life into Adam.

I'm banging on about this because the Session decided this week that the time has come for us to sing our praises to God in the sanctuary. Though we'll still have to be masked and distant from each other, we'll once again sing hymns, sing all responses in Holy Communion, sing the *Gloria Patri*, and sing the big *Amen* at the end.

I put it to you that, if you have missed singing, it may not just because it's 'fun' and 'pleasurable', though it certainly is, but because singing is a fundamental form of faith's first response to the gift of our being alive. And that is what you have missed.

You've missed the chance to sing the lungful of praise you have it in you give. It's in your very spirit to do this because God breathed his Spirit into you. That's why you're alive, for God's sake.

To sing hymns in the sanctuary is to do something mythical and beautiful with our lives. It's to breathe this Spirit back to God in sounds of praise and gratitude, and so to add our own voices to God's long song of creation.

To sing is to re-enchant the world. Yes, it's just that important.

Matters of Business

The Session has approved a proposed budget for 2022. I'm attaching a copy to this email, along with *Common Worship in Separate Places*, just in case you must be at home to worship this Sunday. It's a good budget, and if you dig beneath the surface, it carries good news.

There will be a brief congregational meeting immediately after the close of the worship service on Sunday, November 28. It will give everyone a chance to review, have their say, if they wish, and then adopt the budget.

Elmwood is not rolling in dough, no, but hey, we're solvent. We're sustained by the gift and generosity of those who look to this place with loyal affection and deep appreciation.

Elmwood is our sanctuary of peace, our spiritual home. That's how I see it. I'll bet you do too.

Yours in the faith,
Andrew