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Cavalier Treatment: King Arthur's Vicar

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Cavalier Treatment: King Arthur's Vicar

CAVALIER TREATMENT

KING ARTHUR'S VICAR

LEE SPETH

My high school stood beside one of the old California missions and instilled some sense of proximity to history. In the cemetery the gravestones told the years backward, both by their inscriptions and by their weathering, while the shapes and textures of walks and buildings, with here and there a tarnished artifact, quietly insisted to the living that bygone but real people had contrived to mark the world. California's Spanish antiquities measure far less human time than the relics of Britain, so I can only partly guess the weight of manifest history that must lie upon anyone who lives constantly in the shadows of such remains. But such weight, for the imaginative, must be formidable. Some will be marked in eccentric ways. So Glastonbury marked the Rev. Lionel Lewis.

St. Joseph of Arimathea at Glastonbury is the printed record of this clergyman's obsession. It sold well, for my own copy contains a "Preface to the Seventh Edition". The only year stated is 1955, clearly a late reprint date; I like to think that the book marches on, selling at least in the tourist shops and parish book store at Glastonbury. (My copy was published in London by James Clark & Co.; research will probably confirm that there was no American edition.)

The Rev. Lionel Smithett Lewis, M.A. (no kin to C.S.) spent, according to his metropolitan, William, Bishop of Bath and Wells, "many years of research on this particular tradition." The book, the bishop gingerly hopes, "may help many to a better appreciation of the place which Glastonbury has in the unfolding of our Christian tradition in England." The bishop wisely endorsed no specific conclusions.

Glastonbury is certainly an ancient foundation. Located in the west of England, between Wales and Cornwall, it was early claimed as the home of Joseph and was identified in King Henry II's day as the burial place of Arthur and Guinevere. In another, more famous King Henry's day, the last abbot was gibbeted summarily outside the monastery gate and his community was dispersed, but the church remained and endures to this day as the center of its parish, proclaiming the reformed faith as by law established, and the weathered remnants of Glastonbury have never lost their romantic appeal.

A wonderful store of legends is embedded at this hallowed site. What is remarkable about the Reverend Mr. Lewis is not that, employed as vicar, he found himself interested in all of these tales. What is remarkable is the breath-taking sweep of all-embracing credulity with which he determined to believe in all of them. Had it been averred, in some medieval chronicle that Glastonbury was the very site of Adam's fall, the ingenious clergyman would have slipped a chapter or an appendix into his book solemnly defending the identification.

Thus St. Joseph of Arimathea at Glastonbury is not only a thorough collection of legends attached to a particularly rich location, but it is of double value as a demonstration of what may befall when patriotism and ecclesiastical loyalty combine to dominate the judgment of a well-meaning amateur historian. Yet somehow the result - and what follows must be patronizing - is so endearing

in its completely earnest foolishness that I can not in my heart wish that the book had been any different.

That St. Joseph of Arimathea, he who provided the tomb of Christ, came into Britain at the beginning of the Christian age, founded Glastonbury and there deposited the cup of the Last Supper - the Grail - is a familiar, beloved and unprovable tale. I am personally inclined to encourage it as a legend, though I doubt that in the confusions and panic of that long ago weekend of the Crucifixion anyone would have bothered about sorting out and preserving that particular cup.

It is harmless, I suppose, to assert the tale as fact, even to bring in a great wealth of debatable documentation, but the Rev. Mr. Lewis was, I fear, ill-advised to make a controversial ecclesiological point of the legend. His argument - indeed his main point in writing - is to prove that England, having an older Christian community than Rome, is entitled to the independence of its church. In 211 loosely-structured pages, he fails to grasp that the case against the papacy has nothing to do with ages of bishoprics or churches (churches conceived here as national units). Nor does he see that by so grounding his argument, he seems to be granting the Pope's claim to sovereignty over all churches younger than that at Rome, something Anglican controversialists are usually loathe to do.

He never thought of it because he never thought of other countries. He was the Rampant Englishman, staunch and eager to place what he regarded as his scholarship at the service of Canterbury and the crown. As a high churchman, he felt the tug of Rome; as a loyal Briton he could not countenance that tug, and St. Joseph seemed especially appointed to deliver him from his dilemma.

Nothing, to the vicar, seemed too good for England. He demonstrated to his own satisfaction that Christ had probably lived in the area as a boy. That a Glastonbury chapel is called St. Mary's led him at last to a theory that it marks the tomb of the Virgin.

"On the south side of St. Mary's Chapel ... there appears in the wall a little old stone with two names 'Jesus Maria' in large archaic letters. ... Why suddenly in that wall do those two names appear?... Did the feet of these holy beings named ever tread this spot? I instinctively take off my hat when I approach it. It is a hallowed spot."

This from a clergyman of the reformed church as by law established. Oh Latimer! Oh Ridley!

It is not a mad book; in some ways it is even a careful book. But all its method is formed around the abuse of the word "tradition". Tradition as a source of religious knowledge and practice was spurned by the Reformers of the 1500's as a self-serving cheat devised by the Roman clergy. All final authority was claimed for Scripture and the Elizabethan Anglicans were at one with the continental Protestants on this point. That 19th century rehabilitation of Catholic forms and thought known as the Oxford Movement won for "tradition" a second hearing and it is now, I believe, a respectable concept in most mainline Protestant churches.

Lionel Lewis snatched it up but no one seems to have defined it for him.

The word "tradition" occurs on nearly every page of his book. It justifies accepting medieval accounts of Joseph's journey, justifies a literal belief in the accuracy of Geoffrey of Monmouth and in Arthur's burial, justifies his theory of Mary's tomb. The widow of a former vicar of Tewkesbury avers that there is a proverb in the nearby Mendip range, "As sure as Our Lord was at Priddy" (Priddy is a town in the Mendips) and Mr. Lewis leaps on it as Evidence.

But in Catholic theology to appeal to Tradition for authority is to appeal to doctrines, memories and customs which are believed to exist under the protection of the Holy Spirit and to de-

rive their reliability from him. (I am not here defending the concept, merely describing it.) No such appeal is possible or sanctioned by any church to merely secular memories, even those that concern sacred personages. And tradition in the purely historical sphere may provide a clue, but cannot substantiate.

The Rev. Mr. Lewis, I am sure, went to his own Glastonbury grave never understanding any of this. He had heard that Tradition was reliable and he had indulged no scholastic hairsplittings over the term. He believed he had done Glastonbury honor and through it the Church of England; my guess is that he died a happy man. Were he still alive, I am not sure I would have written this column.

MATTERS OF GRAVE IMPORT

GRACIA FAY ELLWOOD

TEARS

From an Inca myth which explains the rain as the tears of the high god Viracocha, to a Narnian poem in a recent *Mythlore*: "where streams run free / Sweet Lion's tears"--storytellers and poets tend to see tears as a good. No one desires the pain from which they usually rise, but they are assimilated with life-fluids such as blood, water and milk. They are a balm; an ancient Jewish tale tells that tears were a gift of God to Adam and Eve, to assuage the pain of the Fall and the loss of Paradise. They are life-preserving: "Home they brought her warrior dead....She must weep or she will die." They are life-restoring, healing: the tears of Rapunzel healed her husband's blindness; the tears that MacDonald's Light Princess finally shed over the apparent death of her suitor the Prince made her a Solid Person at last.

In contrast to this wisdom of the heart, our culture along with others holds tears in contempt. They are a sign of weakness, allowed to secondary humans--small children and women--but denied to the two-dimensional Strong Man that a male is pressured to compress himself into.

It is not difficult to see why. The legacy of the primitive hunter and warrior is a fighting stance: armor on, weapon in hand, loins girded for the fray, a hard struggle, and above all, Victory. Tears may mean sensitivity, tenderness, which will sabotage a fighter. And tears certainly mean loss of conscious control, thus an opening for the enemy and probable defeat.

The "ideal" is prestigious and pervasive; the need for perpetual control may afflict women as well.

One may give up the ideal and resolve to become more whole, but a long-time habit of tight control can make the prospect of giving way to tears very frightening. Who knows what intensity of feeling may have backed up in the unconscious? To let go may mean finding the windows of heaven opened, the fountains of the great deep broken up, and an all-destroying deluge.

The danger of being overwhelmed by the power of the unconscious is real. One way to let the precious rain begin to fall on the thirsty earth yet prevent a Flood is by means of artistic experience, either in the creating or the receiving. The purpose of tragedy, Aristotle tells us in the *Poetics*, is to catharsize pity and fear. Extending this conception to include other works of art and other

emotions, we can see its great value. It is safe to weep for Hecuba, (or for Aslan's death or Frodo's departure) because they are works of secondary creation. Weeping for them is a good way to open ways between our own inner and outer worlds, so that we can safely weep for a sister, or a father, or our own wounded inner child.

Tears of joy do not present the same kind of threat to us, and anyone who has accepted the idea of tears as healthy may relish a good private cry over the healing of Digory's mother (as Jack Lewis could not heal his own mother) or the celebration at Cormallen. But to be the only one weeping, whether for pain or joy, among others who are composed is very hard. It is like being naked among the clothed, being a fool in the midst of the respectable. One falls not only at a disadvantage, but somehow humiliated.

This feeling cannot be explained altogether in terms of loss of control. A wild rage means a loss of control, and though disapproved it is not condemned as weeping is; it can be useful to a fighter. What is going on when we experience the joy that hurts is an act of submission, which, from the perspective of the fighting stance, is the ultimate disaster. We have seen into the heart of things, have visibly surrendered to That which is there and have made a self-offering. "By tender violence I was unmade....A mightier than I became my Liege." As in childbirth, indignity and pain and joy meet in a flow of new life.

The self-offering can of course be made in other ways, and a surrender to painful joy may be only momentary, having small effect on the overall course of a life. But one who tries to live out such an ultimate self-offering from moment to moment may find, with Sybil Coningsby (and no doubt Williams himself) that at some point the fool becomes the Fool at the Center, that surrender is sovereignty. *Incipit vita nova.*

LOTR ON RADIO

The BBC produced radio serialization of The Lord of the Rings will be starting the Fall as part of the NPR Playhouse. Many (but not all) NPR member stations will be carrying it on FM radio. Check with your local NPR member station for dates and times.

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