

Father Christmas in Narnia

Ilmington Carols 2025

I have confession to make! A few weeks ago I was invited to take part in a podcast about the Coventry Carol ([The Coventry Carol—Hark! The stories behind our favorite Christmas carols – Apple Podcasts](#)). The very nice American host asked me a little about myself and where I live. I said we were at the top of the Cotswolds, close to Stratford-upon-Avon, but I got the impression that they were a bit tired of hearing about Shakespeare, and she asked me whether any other people she might have heard of had lived here. ‘Well, not actually here’ I said, ‘but just over the hill in the Vale of Evesham is where JRR Tolkien grew up. The houses in our village, with thatched roofs and little round windows, look like hobbit houses – you almost expect a hobbit to come out of them!’

But of course, in the edit this became, ‘Richard lives in a little village where JRR Tolkien grew up’, and my words sound as if I think all of my parishioners are hobbits! So there’s my confession, which comes with my apology. I don’t think this is a village of hobbits!

The podcast is worth listening to, as are its other episodes on other carols – but it’s not what I want to talk about tonight. Tolkien, and his friend CS Lewis, on the other hand, are.

Many of us were here last Tuesday for our dramatized reading of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, by CS Lewis. Though Lewis and Tolkien were very good friends, who read early drafts of their work to each other, Tolkien didn’t like *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* or Narnia. At all.

Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* is an extraordinary achievement. Over many years he created a fully independent world which he called ‘Middle-earth’, consistent in all its details, with its own complex history. He even invented complete languages for it. But the alternative world Tolkien created out of his imagination was totally self-contained and had no connection with our world.

Which is why he didn’t like Narnia. Where Middle-earth is consistent and obeys its own rules, Narnia is not and does not. Lewis brought everything into Narnia - a glorious mixture of mythologies. Greek-inspired centaurs, dryads (spirits of trees) and fauns mix with the Norse-inspired Snow Queen (aka the White Witch) and her wolves and dwarves, for example. Aslan, the great lion himself, is drawn from one of the Old Testament’s images for God, his name comes from the Turkish for both lion and emperor. For Tolkien, this would not do. Where’s the consistency? he asked. And in particular, ‘What on earth is Father Christmas doing in Narnia?’

If you were here last week you might have asked the same question, seeing our Father Christmas’s bravura performance – worth the ticket price just on its own! – it certainly brought the sense of joy and fun into the story, as Father Christmas is intended to do.

Tolkien was often accused of escapism with *The Lord of the Rings*. Talking to CS Lewis about this once he asked, ‘Well, who wants to stop people escaping? Jailers, that’s who!’ But there is a point to the accusation, which might extend to many of the stories we have around us today:

the many TV shows or films that provide consistent alternative worlds for us to escape to, at least for a few hours, from the hard reality of the world around us.

But CS Lewis was doing something different with Narnia.

Narnia is not consistent because it is not self-contained. The children in the story reach it through a portal from our world which is nothing more than a forgotten wardrobe in the spare room of an old house. An ordinary, everyday object becomes the way into another world. The membrane between this world and the Narnian world is permeable – one may reach into the other in a way that simply doesn't happen with Tolkien's Middle-earth.

There are things in Narnia which don't make sense in that world. If you have a tidy mind like Tolkien, that can drive you mad. Why does Father Christmas appear in Narnia, when he surely only belongs to the human world the children have come from? Well, he brings a new layer of meaning that can be hard to understand but symbolizes beautifully that the spell the White Witch has cast – 'Always Winter and Never Christmas' - is broken. Children get this, even if adults don't always do the same!

As a young man CS Lewis was an angry atheist. His mother had died cruelly of cancer when he was only 9. His father couldn't cope and sent him to an all-boys boarding school which he found brutal. Aged 19 he was badly wounded as a young officer on the Western Front in the First World War and saw his closest friend killed. He had much to be angry about. From childhood and into adulthood, the only consolation he found was in stories – myths and legends, especially those of dying and rising gods, such as the Norse myth of Baldur the beautiful. Yet, beautiful as they were and deeply as they moved him, he mistrusted these stories. The beauty he found in them was an illusion, he said. They offered no hope, just a fleeting experience of joy that could never be captured. In others words, an escape – but only for a time, before he came back to reality with a bump, haunted by the horrors he'd seen in the war.

He and his friend Tolkien, then young academics, walked by the river in Oxford one Summer evening after dinner in 1931. All these beautiful stories, said Lewis, are 'lies – even if lies breathed through silver.' That's one way to look at it, said Tolkien, but how would it be if there is a story that is true? One story that is not just a story. That happened in a specific place and a time that we can identify. How would it be if there is a myth that became fact? That God himself, the great author, imagined into actual being? If that were so, then perhaps those moments of joy you feel when you hear those stories are little fragments of the real truth, and have been pointing you towards it all along? Lewis finally got to bed at 4am, just as the dawn began to break on the Oxford skyline and the birds began to sing.

Lewis came to see that the story of Jesus was not a myth – not just a story. 'I have been reading poems, romances...legends, myths, all my life' he said much later. 'I know what they are like. I know that not one of them is like this.' He came to believe that in the birth of Jesus, God stepped into our world, that the worlds of heaven and earth are closer than we think, that the membrane between them is permeable. That one can affect the other.

So though there is no Nativity in Narnia, it's really all about Christmas - this time of year when we sense that the boundaries between heaven and earth are more blurred than we think, just as the old stories of Jesus' birth tell us that the shepherds found, haphazardly on their hillside.

Lewis's Narnia is not self-contained. It is fictional, but it points to the true relationship between earth and heaven and helps us to believe that solid joys and lasting treasures, as one of the old hymns puts it, do exist; to believe that hope is possible as we sing again that Christ was born amongst us. Anywhere may be a portal to that other world, but perhaps especially places like this church, which for so many centuries has been a place where we touch something of the reality of heaven in our worship, and in the plain bread and simple wine celebrate communion and taste the goodness of God.

So to respond to Tolkien's question, 'What on earth is Father Christmas doing in Narnia?', I would say that Father Christmas in Narnia is a kind of symbol of the permeability of earth and heaven. He blurs the boundaries between Narnia and other worlds. He offers us a reminder perhaps that our world too is not self-contained. The gifts Father Christmas brings to the children in the story are, he says, 'tools not toys'. Through them we glimpse that Christmas itself is not just a time of escape, but a time for gathering strength for renewed commitment to engage again in the New Year with God in the struggle for justice and truth in our world. The Crib, which tells of God's gift to us of the Christ-child, and which we have in our homes at Christmas, is not a toy but a tool – a tool that in God's hands and ours may be used to fashion a better future.

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