

## Torah, Tolkien and a Kansas Farm Boy

C.S. Lewis described his journey into faith as being “Surprised by Joy.” I believe that my own journey into the Catholic Church could perhaps best be summed up as “surprised by beauty.” Growing up on a farm, I was exposed to the beauty of God’s creation almost instantaneously with my birth. Strangely, I didn’t come to fully associate beauty with God’s truth until much later.

### “Just Christian”

I grew up in Thayer, Kansas, attending the local Christian Church. The truth, as it was presented in my church, included a handful of distinctives which were settled upon by the early “Disciples of Christ.” The Reformation didn’t go far enough, according to the founders of our movement. One of them, Thomas Campbell, described their work as “this present reformation.” They believed that they had discovered the apostolic pattern in Scripture, and were bound to restore it to the Church. This apostolic pattern, supposedly based mostly on Acts, is something like this:

1. “Believers’ baptism.” I.e., adult baptism and its necessity.
2. Presbyterian ecclesiology. A number of elders and deacons preside in every church. These are elected. There is no hierarchical structure beyond the local church.
3. Weekly communion.
4. No name but Christian. They expected all the other churches to drop their names and join them. We prided ourselves on being “Just Christians.” Of course, this meant that we mostly only hung out with other “Just Christians.”

Eventually this produced a very self-righteous type of Christianity. We really believed that we had it right, and everyone else had it wrong. Mostly, we were defined by our differences with everyone else. Our mission was to get everyone into our particular church.

One of the many results of this kind of teaching for me was that I grew to distrust any religious expression, no matter how beautiful or seemingly doctrinally sound, which looked very different from that with which I was familiar. A well-formed liturgy was especially suspicious. I learned early to disdain prayer by rote. Prayer was supposed to be Spirit-led and spontaneous, right? In our church, the liturgy was stark and simple.

## Hell-Fire and Hobbits

When I was seven years old, three very important things happened to me. First, my aunt and uncle invited me to a vacation Bible school at their Bible Baptist Church. The preacher there told us all that we were damned. I can still remember him putting before us a litany of things which would send you to hell, one of which was listening to Michael Jackson! We were all going to hell. But if you said the "Sinner's Prayer," you could get out of it. Of course, I was mortified. So, I had a meeting with him and said the Sinner's Prayer. But it was really difficult for me to believe that just saying these "magic words" was going to change the Creator's mind about me. Seven year olds aren't stupid. He'd convinced me that God wanted to send me to Hell. How was I supposed to believe that all of a sudden, just repeating a few words after the preacher was going to make that all right?

So I went home, and talked to my own preacher. And he said, "Of course it's not all right. You have to get baptized." So I was baptized. It was not a joyful day for me, as I remember it. I just didn't want to go to hell.

All of this really confused me. We sang "Jesus loves me", but then were told that if we made one false move, we were toast. Christianity was basically about escaping hell. The beauty of heaven was not about being in the presence of the God who loves us, but about getting to home-base so that we couldn't be condemned by Him. I worried constantly. If I knew that I had done something wrong, I would worry that I was going to hell, and was actually afraid that God was going to do something to kill me to send me there! I knew more about God's wrath than His compassion.

Fortunately, there were other things awaiting me that summer which were much sweeter than this morbid VBS. I was a precocious reader. My mother gave me a Bible at my baptism, and I began to read it straight through. I did this because I wanted to get out of hell, and we'd been told that Christians need to read their Bible. I took them seriously. Even though I began to read out of fear, I fell in love with it in the process. By the time that I was ten, I had read the Bible (Protestant) through at least once.

Finally, an aunt who was very impressed with my reading abilities loaned me her set of the Lord of the Rings. I devoured them, and that, I believe, had more than anything else to do with my becoming Catholic some twenty years later. This is why. I could sense that there was a beauty and a spirituality in those books that was shared with the Scripture that I was reading. I could also sense that this spirituality was richer and more authentic than that which I was receiving in my church.

That just made me feel guilty about having such thoughts at this stage, however.

### **Tolkien's Dirty Secret**

As I got older, I discovered the writings of Tolkien's good friend, Lewis. I read Narnia, and then began to read his other writings. When I was fourteen or so, I began to read his non-fiction, and that is probably where I began to step out of my denominational construct. I believe that Mere Christianity began to really heal those old hurts I received at that VBS. I began to understand not just what the Bible said, but what it meant, and it meant something grander than I had ever imagined. It meant that God wanted me for a son, and wanted to transplant His very identity into me to achieve that.

But I had a huge problem. I was being fed spiritual food by a guy from a church (Anglican) that most people in my own church didn't consider to be even Christian! In the end, I chose Lewis. That was the first time that I shook off a bit of what I'd been taught to believe.

My next big step was to buy a book called the "Tolkien Reader" with some of his odds and ends in it. Most importantly, it contains his beautiful essay on fairy tales. At the very end of the essay, Tolkien says something quite stirring. He writes that the Gospel is the most beautiful fairy tale of all, because it's the only one that is completely true. So, I knew at last that Tolkien's spirituality was Christian! A few months later, I found out that not only was it Christian, but Catholic. Moreover, he was in part responsible for Lewis's conversion to Christianity from atheism. I was flabbergasted. How could this be? Catholics weren't Christians at all. Everyone knew that!

But there it was. Tolkien had plainly helped bring Lewis to Christ. Moreover, something rang true about his spirituality. It was like the Bible. I didn't know what to do with all of this, of course, but I at least accepted that, wonder of wonders, there were authentic Christians to be found in the Catholic Church, even amazing ones, in touch with a beauty that was almost foreign to my religious tradition.

### **Ministry**

At the end of high school, I made the decision to attend Ozark Christian College in Joplin, Missouri. I got a Bachelor of Theology in the Old Testament, with a minor emphasis on Greek. (The education I received there is one of the best gifts bestowed upon me by the Christian Churches). I was minister in a small country church. I planned to go to the mission field, Israel to be exact. I fell in love with a beautiful girl I met in Greek class my freshman year and Robin and we decided to make

a life together. We were ordained on Yom Kippur, 2000, a few months after my graduation.

By this time I had come even further in my acceptance of brothers and sisters from other denominational backgrounds, in particular, Catholics. Somewhere along the way, I bought a used copy of The Book of Common Prayer. I was taken with the beautiful prayers. It made sense to me to use a lectionary, to read scripture as the Church, instead of as a church. I started to use the lectionary, even though I never told the little church I was preaching in what I was doing. I would even slip in a few prayers from the liturgy in here and there, usually modernized a bit, or memorized in such a way as to make them sound “spontaneous.”

I should also make mention of our exposure to NFP in the months before our marriage. Lack of space hinders me from elucidating this leg of the journey which we share with many other converts. I will simply state that it became evident to us very quickly that on this subject the Catholic Church was right, and most of the people in our own churches were wrong.

Bit by bit, beauty was laying claim to our spiritual life. The concept that Truth and Beauty are inseparable was already beginning to make sense. I knew God as the Author of the beauty in nature. I knew Him as the Author of the beauty I found in Scripture as well, (and my exposure to Biblical languages only increased this aesthetic pleasure). Why should spiritual truths not be aesthetic? Why shouldn't we care about presenting them in a manner in concert with their beauty? Most disturbing of all was the realization that my movement had produced a president (Garfield) and a number of great preachers, but not a single recognized poet, writer or visual artist. I was beginning to have difficulties feeling very much at home there.

### **The Beauty of Judaism**

In our preparation for the move to Israel, we started going every now and then to a Reformed Jewish temple. There we fell in love with liturgy. We found that it drew us into worship in a way which we had never experienced. Once again, this produced intense feelings of guilt. I often felt that I could worship God more easily with these Jewish people and their rote prayers than in the little country church where I was leading the worship service!

I used the excuse of “cultural preparation” to indulge my growing infatuation with Jewish tradition. For our first Christmas together, my wife got a “hanukiyah,” the special Hanukah candlestick. I learned the prayers which attended the lighting of the candles, and we celebrated Christmas and Hanukah together. I made “Haman's ears” for Purim, and gave some to a Jewish philosophy professor. Messianic Judaism was also

appealing, but a bit bewildering, because of all of the disagreement about the importance of Jewish tradition. (Many Messianic Jews, especially in Israel, treat Jewish tradition with the same disdain that Evangelicals display towards Christian tradition, while others tend towards the other extreme and make certain traditions a sort of litmus test of authentic spirituality).

## **Israel**

On January 1, 2002 we arrived in Beer-Sheva, Israel, with our daughter. We were supported by the churches in which we had grown up with the purpose of building up an existing Messianic-Jewish congregation in Beer-Sheva. I also began a Master's program in the Department of Bible and the Ancient Near East at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev.

### **An Unexpected Discovery**

While in Beer-Sheva, a number of extremely important developments came about. We learned Hebrew and grew to love Israel. The Lord bestowed upon us a second child, our first son. Most dramatic, however, was our discovery of the Catholic Church.

As I learned more and more about Judaism, I was struck by the numerous parallels I found between it and Catholicism, and more profoundly by the lack of contact between my own religious tradition, and even that of the Messianics, with traditional Judaism. This presented a huge problem for me, because I still believed that the Catholic Church had basically taken Jewish Christianity and messed it all up with pagan stuff. What I was finding was that Catholicism was Jewish to the core. A few of these parallels I found in liturgy; a hierarchy, established through sacramental ordination, with a succession going back to the fathers; prayer to saints; prayers for the dead; and sacred tradition.

One instance of correspondence between Judaism and Catholicism is particularly beautiful to me now. When you step into any synagogue, your attention is drawn to what is called the aron, or "ark." It is there that the Torah scroll is kept. Jewish worshippers pray in the direction of the ark, and do reverence to the scroll when it is brought out. Indeed, it is the scroll which sanctifies the synagogue and distinguishes it from any other building. It is as though the scroll signifies for them the presence of God. (The word "ark," I believe, deliberately harks back to the Ark of the Covenant). Of course, when I began to understand Catholic architecture, the parallels between the ark and the tabernacle were quite plain. Instead of a scroll, we have the Word Made Flesh residing in our places of worship.

Such realizations provoked me to do an honest study of the structure and beliefs of the earliest Church, and I approached the Apostolic Fathers for help. The Catholic Church which they depicted for me was impossible for me to ignore.

Then I went back to the New Testament, and started reading it over with this new perspective. All of a sudden, the old arguments kind of crumbled. It wasn't so clear to me that an infant shouldn't be baptized. The old proof texts, like Acts 2:38 seemed forced. (It was mostly grown men in Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost, not infants, so it's not surprising that Peter told them all to repent and be baptized. If they'd all been holding babies, he might have said something different). I started to see things I'd never seen before. For instance, in Acts 1, when Peter tells the Apostles that they must choose someone to fill Judas' position, he calls that position, usually translated "office" in English Bibles, an episcopate, or a bishopric in the original Greek. It's right there, apostolic succession in the first chapter of Acts. I read through the Pastoral Epistles again, and saw that the same thing was going on there. Timothy and Titus had been ordained by Paul as bishops to ordain others in Ephesus and Crete. Early Christians, in contrast to the churches I'd grown up in, didn't have elections!

The most thrilling element of these discoveries for me was the aesthetic confirmation of these truths. With each new understanding there was an appreciation of God's beauty, and the beauty of His works, that I had yet to discover. I was discovering that Catholicism had the right "scent" about it. My heart had been prepared for this by Tolkien and the Reformed temple in Joplin.

The deciding factor for us, however, was the desperate need for Christian unity in Beer-Sheva. Christians are a minority in Israel. In Beer-Sheva, a city with a population of 180,000 or so, there are somewhere around 500 Christians. These are divided amongst several congregations, and these congregations have little or nothing to do with one another. We were moved to visit the Catholic congregation in town, "to see if there were any Christians there." We were welcomed to fellowship there with love and joy, and were moved by the deep faith displayed by the little church. We began to attend on a semi-regular basis.

However, I felt that the Lord was calling us into a yet deeper, more challenging relationship with His Church, and I began to do serious research on Catholicism. I discovered late one night the website for The Coming Home Network, and I began to receive materials from them in the mail. One day, when a box of books arrived for me, my wife asked me where I had gotten them. Up to this point I had not yet summoned up enough courage to raise the possibility with her of actually becoming

Catholic. I opened the box, handed her a book entitled Journeys Home, and suggested that she read this book that a person I had “met online” had sent to me. She came to me a few days later asking me, “Are we going to become Catholic, or what?”

### **A Difficult Decision**

Were we going to become Catholic, or what? I repeated the question over and over again before the Lord one cold, windy day as I trudged the two kilometers from our home to the University campus. I said, “Jesus, if we become Catholic, this could really mess a lot of things up in our life. We could lose all of our support.”

I heard the Lord speak into my heart, “Do you love Me more than your support?”

“But Jesus, if we lose our support, we may have to return home!”

“Do you love Me more than living in Israel?”

“But what will all of our family say?”

“Do you love Me more than your family?”

As I propped up each obstacle, I was confronted by Jesus’ call to love Him and follow Him into difficulty.

### **Catholic!**

On November 27, 2004, my wife Robin and I received confirmation, and our children were baptized. It was the thrilling conclusion of an exhilarating faith journey.

Since then, many of our fears have been confirmed. Life has been difficult on a number of levels. However, ours is a beauty that we grow deeper into from one day to the next. “For a day in thy courts is better than a thousand elsewhere!”