

## READING

*In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit. Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell, nor yet a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat: it was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort. It had a perfectly round door like a porthole, painted green, with a shiny yellow brass knob in the exact middle. The door opened on to a tube-shaped hall like a tunnel: a very comfortable tunnel without smoke, with panelled walls, and floors tiled and carpeted, provided with polished chairs, and lots and lots of pegs for hats and coats—the hobbit was fond of visitors...*

### **John Dickson (studio)**

Hearing those words sends a shiver down my spine, and draws on deep memories of childhood. In fact, I still have on the shelf opposite me the 40-year-old copy of *The Hobbit* I pinched from my older brother - who was

raving and raving about the book, so I ‘borrowed’ it. Sorry, Rob, if you’re listening (which he never does).

J.R.R. Tolkien wrote *The Hobbit* (or *There and Back Again*, as he called it) not for us, but for his grandchildren.

We might never have known about it were it not for one of Tolkien’s students at Oxford (Elaine Griffiths) who suggested to Allen & Unwin publishers that it might make a good children’s book.

The chairman, Stanley Unwin, gave it to his own ten-year-old Rayner, who famously wrote: “This book, with the help of maps, does not need any illustrations. It is good and should appeal to all children between the ages of 5 and 9.”

Well, it’s appealed to a wider readership than that since its publication in 1937.

The Times referred to it as, “One of the most influential books of our generation.”

And, of course, *The Hobbit* was the seed from which grew the best-known Tolkien epic, *The Lord of the Rings* - and we'll get to that, too!

More than giving us great stories, these books – so Director Mark informs me - launched an entire modern literary genre: fantasy fiction, where the gap between fairytales and normal life is bridged.

I'll take his word for that. I'm like a lot of people. I'm sure I don't like fantasy fiction - or even people who like fantasy fiction - but I like Tolkien.

## READING

*I am in fact a hobbit in all but size. I like gardens, trees, and unmechanized farmlands; I smoke a pipe, and like good plain food (unrefrigerated), but detest French cooking; I like, and even dare to wear in these dull days, ornamental waistcoats. I am fond of mushrooms (out of a field); have a very simple sense of humour (which even my appreciative critics find tiresome); I go to bed late and get up late (when possible). I do not travel much.*

*The Hobbits are just rustic English people, made small in size because it reflects the generally small reach of their imagination – not the small reach of their courage or latent power.*

*I've always been impressed that we are here, surviving, because of the indomitable courage of quite small people against impossible odds. - **J.R.R. Tolkien***

## **John Dickson (studio)**

And so Bilbo Baggins is an ordinary hobbit - a down-to-earth character, but also one who walked along the edges of a much grander tale.

Because, while Tolkien was writing about common-sense heroes, he also spent much of his life constructing an entire mythical landscape in which characters like Bilbo, Frodo, Sam, Merry and Pippin would wander.

A high fantasy that reached beyond simple hack-and-slash stories of warriors and beasts - here was a mythology that pointed to something much larger

than the author's imagination ... something real. In fact, the truly real.

Tolkien was a Christian writer - not in the sense that he wrote *about* Christianity (in the way that his friend CS Lewis did) but in the sense that he wrote from *within* a Christian universe about the world as it really is.

He believed that all genuinely good stories pointed to the one overarching epic about 'the Good'--how we have fallen away from it and how unseen forces can bring us back.

I'm John Dickson and this is Undeceptions.

### **John Dickson (studio)**

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was born on January 3, 1892, in the Orange Free State in Southern Africa. It's now just called the Free State Province of South Africa.

He and his mother and brother moved to England when he was three for what was meant to be just an extended visit. It became permanent when his father died of rheumatic fever before he could join them.

His early life was a story of dependence - on his extended family for financial support, and his mother, Mabel, for his homeschooling and faith.

And here, to tell us more, is Professor Alison Milbank, Canon Theologian at Southwell Minster near Nottingham and a professor at the University of Nottingham.

She studied theology and literature at Cambridge University and completed her doctorate at the University of Lancaster.

Among her many publications is *Chesterton and Tolkien as Theologians: The Fantasy of the Real*.

**John Dickson:** He obviously ended up being terribly bright and learned, but, uh, were there signs of that early on?

**Alison Milbank:** Well, when he was at school, he went to the King Edward II Grammar School in Birmingham, which is a famous state school. Mm-hmm. Um, he, he

did well and he had, uh, a circle of friends whom John Garth has written about, who met for kind of literary conversation, and they all saw themselves as people of faith and all people who were going to contribute to the future. They had a very kind of high view of themselves and their kind of vocation.

### ***Tolkien Movie excerpt***

#### **John Dickson (studio)**

That's the 2019 film *Tolkien*, starring Nicholas Hoult. It tracks the great man's life from his early school days through to the fateful writing of that first line of *The Hobbit*.

It perfectly captures the creative camaraderie that was so important for Tolkien personally and for his stories.

**Alison Milbank:** There's several of them died in the First World War. Mm. Um, so Tolkien kind of carried on the project, if you like.

**John Dickson:** I see. So is this where the Tea Club Breve, avian Barrovian Society comes in?

**Alison Milbank:** That's right. That's right. This was this, this little group who met and gave papers to each other and read their poems aloud and this sort of thing. Um, it was very much of the time GK Chesterton had a similar kind of club when he was at school in Dun.

### ***Tolkien movie excerpt***

#### **John Dickson (studio)**

Tolkien's love affair with language began with his mother's Latin lessons—of course!!

After marrying his childhood sweetheart Edith in 1916, they moved to Oxford to follow his obsession.

His first job as a researcher was in 1920 with what would become the Oxford English Dictionary. (He spent much of his time investigating the Germanic origins of English words beginning with W - that's actually a lot of words, like the word *wort* ... 'word', for instance!)



After a stint up in Leeds, he returned to Oxford University in 1925 as the Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon, with a fellowship at Pembroke College.

**John Dickson:** He was fascinated by language. Um, how and when did he move into that as a specialty, and what did he like specializing in?

**Alison Milbank:** Well, he moved into that very early on in his university career and obviously philology and English. With that particular interest formed his whole career. I, I once had the privilege of examining his copy of the *Summer Theological*, and it had little slips inside where he'd marked the place with, um, sort of lecture handouts on Anglo-Saxon from his lectures.

**John Dickson:** Really? Wow. So he was a Thomas Aquinas fan? Was he?

**Alison Milbank:** Well, I argue so, and he certainly owned a copy, uh, which was bought by somebody in Italy. Um, and there are little pencil marginalia that I think, um, are Tolkienian because they're on the same

pages as these slips. Whereas I think this copy belonged to, um, a priest earlier who made another set of notes on this edition.

But to, seems to have noted things to do with marriage. So, um, while he was in the boarding house, he met his future wife, who was also an orphan and also living this kind of life. Um, and they weren't allowed to marry for a while 'cause they were very, very young. Um, and so he seems to have looked up Canon Lord on marriage, as you might say, what Thomas Coiner said about it.

**John Dickson:** Oh, that's funny. Um, and, and then, um, what was his, uh, early academic posting? So he, he starts at Oxford though.

He has a, you know, he has a, a little period, uh, uh, away at Leeds. Um, but then most of his life, he's in Oxford. Um, and, uh, Very much of Oxford lived in Heddington and other parts of Oxford with his growing family of four children.

Eventually, um, we once did an episode for interceptions, uh, about, um, Oxford on, uh, Oxford's impact on CS Lewis...

## **John Dickson (studio)**

That's Episode 81, by the way, Lewis' Oxford.

**John Dickson:** I'm wondering if you've got any thoughts about how Oxford. Uh, shaped, um, Tolkien's own output and personal life.

**Alison Milbank:** Well, obviously the, the Oxford, um, circles of friends were very important to him and the Oxford countryside, the, the, the Marlborough down south of Oxford, um, are probably very shy. Like so that side of Oxford, the kind of the woods outside Oxford. The, the fact that Oxford ends very abruptly and the country kind of comes right in is, is quite important in terms of Oxford intellectual life, talking's terribly sort of. He's very much an independent thinker. He doesn't belong to schools of thought of other people, and he's often kind of quite resistant to other writers.

## **John Dickson (studio)**

Tolkien's obsession with philology - the structure, historical development, and relationships of languages - was extreme, even by an Oxford don's standards.

He didn't just make up fanciful names for his fantasy stories, he constructed entire, functional languages—the ancient language of the kings of men, one for the horse lords, another for dwarves, and then two complete Elvish tongues.

One of those, by the way, was influenced by the Finnish language - *kuinka ihmeellistä!*

His fascination with *Middle English*, which derived from Anglo-Saxon (his specialty), also inspired his poetry.

Here's his most famous one, about the love between the man Beren and the elf-maid Lúthien. Apparently, it came to Tolkien when his beloved Edith danced for him under the trees. So sweet.

## ***READING***

*But as she went he swiftly came  
and called her with the tender name*

*of nightingales in elvish tongue  
that all the woods now sudden rung:  
'Tinúviel! Tinúviel!'  
And clear his voice was as a bell;  
its echoes wove, a binding spell:  
'Tinúviel! Tinúviel!'  
His voice such love and longing filled  
one moment stood she, fear was stilled;  
one moment only; like a flame  
he leaped towards her as she stayed  
and caught and kissed that elven maid.  
As love there woke in sweet surprise  
the starlight trembled in her eyes.  
A! Lúthien! A! Lúthien!  
more fair than any child of Men;  
O! loveliest maid of Elvenesse,  
what madness does thee now possess!  
A! lissom limbs and shadowy hair  
and chaplet of white snowdrops there;  
O! starry diadem and white  
pale hands beneath the pale moonlight!  
She left his arms and slipped-away  
just at the breaking of the day.*

## ***The meeting of Beren and Luthien from The Lay of Lethien.***

### **John Dickson (studio)**

Tolkien's post at Oxford brought him into contact with another would-be poet and writer of fantastical tales ... Clive Staples Lewis.

Tolkien and Lewis formed a deep friendship.

They also made a formidable team at the university, advocating for the scholarly study of English itself.

**Alison Milbank:** Uh, so it's difficult to think of him in terms of Oxford politics, except that he and Lewis obviously did join together to stand up for the, the, the study of language, very traditional ways of studying English literature at Oxford.

This was the period when CS Lewis in the late twenties was coming to theism. But very famously, his, his mind was convinced of theism, but he, at that point in his life, he has this very sort of rationalistic view of things so

that he sees imagination very much in a kind of dialectic with reason.

In fact, he wrote a poem about it in which imagination is Demeter and, and the sort of under dark side and reason is Athena. Mm-hmm. Was Tolkien actually wrote a poem for him called *Mythopoeia*. Where he tries to show him that you cannot see things properly unless you see them mythically.

## **READING**

*To one who said that myths were lies and therefore worthless, even though 'breathed through silver'...*

*The heart of man is not compound of lies,  
but draws some wisdom from the only Wise,  
and still recalls him. Though now long estranged,  
man is not wholly lost nor wholly changed.  
Dis-graced he may be, yet is not dethroned,  
and keeps the rags of lordship once he owned,  
his world-dominion by creative act:  
not his to worship the great Artefact.  
Man, sub-creator, the refracted light  
through whom is splintered from a single White*

*to many hues, and endlessly combined  
in living shapes that move from mind to mind.  
Though all the crannies of the world we filled  
with elves and goblins, though we dared to build  
gods and their houses out of dark and light,  
and sow the seed of dragons, 'twas our right  
(used or misused). The right has not decayed.  
We make still by the law in which were made.*

## **Mythopoeia**

**Alison Milbank:** That undergirds both of their work, but particularly Tolkiens, which is that we make still by the law in which we are made. So we are made as makers and we make myths, um, but we make them according to truth. And so truth and myths go together. And obviously for Tolkien Christianity is the true myth because myth and history come together.

And he wrote about this at length in his essay on fairy stories, which he wrote later on as a in the forties, and was later extended as a little book where he has his most extensive writing about the truth of the gospel as myth. Yeah. So I want to ask you about fairytales, uh, in



a moment. Yeah. Um, can, can we just hover around, uh, what do we know of Tolkien's influence on Lewis, um, in terms of that journey toward the Christian faith?

**John Dickson:** What was it one, one often hears about a famous walk that they had around the Deer Park in Magdalen College? I mean, was that it? Do, what do we know of it?

**Alison Milbank:** The, that the walking around the Deer Park seems to have been important. So there was a walk that Tolkien did, and I think Hugo Dyson was there too. And Lewis, and this seems to have been important, whether it came before the poem or after the poem, I don't know, but it, it's all around that time. Um, and, and these walks and it is very, very beautiful. Deer Park. So you can really understand the kind of inclination of power of nature as you walk around there Um, and it does seem to have been at that point that. Lewis embraced Christianity. In fact, Tolkien was disappointed that Louis didn't become a Catholic, but you know, he, he had been brought up a Northern Irish Protestant.

I think that would've been a step too far for him. He's very much a kind of Anglican Yes. In his thought. Yes. Yes.

## **John Dickson (studio)**

Many people know that Tolkien and CS Lewis were part of a writing group that met at the 'Eagle and Child' pub, just down the road from here - the famous Inklings.

Few people are aware, though, that they were part of another group that predated that one - it was called the Coalbiters, or the Kolbítar, to give it its Icelandic title.

Coalbiters referred to those who sat so close to the fire in winter that they 'bit the coal'.

It was an informal reading club for dons that was founded by Tolkien. They met at night several times a term in rooms here at Balliol College to read Icelandic Sagas to each other.

I Can't understand why that didn't catch on...

Tolkien's mother had instilled in him a love of green and growing things. His heart never really left the forests and villages surrounding Birmingham where he grew up.

He wasn't much of a hiker (as Lewis was) but he was profoundly affected in 1911 by a walking trip to the Pennine Alps on the border of Switzerland and Italy.

He picked up a postcard there of a painting called Der Berggeist - the Mountain Spirit.

Guess what it shows ...

It's a forest scene. And in the middle was an old man with a white beard, big hat, and a long cloak. He's sitting there gently talking to a white fawn that's nuzzling in his upturned hands. The man seems wise, humorous, and compassionate.

This was the origin of the wizard character Gandalf. We know this because long afterwards Tolkien wrote on the paper cover he wrapped it in the words: 'Origin of Gandalf'.

Enter Ian McKellan's portrayal of Gandalf in Peter Jackson's incredible Lord of the Rings trilogy.

### ***Lord of the Rings movie excerpt***

**John Dickson:** These are all very ethereal, magical, uh, things that lie in the background of Tolkien's thought patterns. But what about the very concrete? Great war. What, what, um, influence did World War I, uh, have on Tolkien?

**Alison Milbank:** Well, Tolkien and indeed World War II, I guess. Yes. Well, World War II through his son Christopher in particular, had quite an effect. Um, so World War I, he fought in. As I say, he's a signaler. So he went round, um, sort of on his own, quite dangerous work, but, but sort of sorting out all their communications and he was invalided out, but some of his friends died and he also. Learned a great respect for the ordinary soldiers. And so Sam Gamgee in the Lord of the Rings is based on those soldiers, and in many ways, he is very much the hero.

### **John Dickson (studio)**

Samwise 'Sam' Gamgee is a hobbit gardener and close companion of Frodo. He briefly holds the One Ring, when he thinks Frodo is dead. He's determined to complete the mission and destroy the ring.

He's a simple but profound character.

He wonders out loud, "So that was the job I felt I had to do when I started - to help Mr. Frodo to the last step and then die with him?"

And then he answers himself, "Well, if that is the job then I must do it. But I would dearly like to see Bywater again, and Rosie Cotton and her brothers, and the Gaffer and Marigold and all."

**Alison Milbank:** The ordinary hero who never gives up hope, who is never corrupted, that he hasn't had to hold the, the ring as long as poor Frodo. Um, and that dates from World War I and then World War ii, he was just horrified by, I mean, just think of people, they've been through World War I and they're just, as their children are growing up.

It all happens again and his great hatred of war and violence and, and the will to power that Nietzsche and will to power that you see in the Nazis he hates and though it's not an allegory, and he got very cross when people said it's just World War II in Lord of the Rings. Obviously it affects it. And the whole war industrial complex in which the whole of society becomes dedicated to producing weapons of mass destruction.

He, he really hates. And his son Christopher? Um, I think he was in the air, was he in the Air Force? I'm trying to remember now. I think so. So that they, they exchanged a great number of letters during the war. And so it affected him very strongly, and that's when he's writing the Lord of the Rings during the war.

### **John Dickson (studio)**

Tolkien was apparently a bit of a tortured artist.

He was a slave to getting the details exactly right—the languages, the mood, the backstories, the phases of the moon across the *Lord of the Rings*, and so on. It took him more than 12 years to write. And it took another five years to convince Allen & Unwin to publish it.

But throughout it all, he had the encouragement of his Inklings, especially Lewis.

Tolkien wrote, “The unpayable debt that I owe to him was not ‘influence’ as it is ordinarily understood, but sheer encouragement. He was for long my only audience. Only from him did I ever get the idea that my ‘stuff’ could be more than a private hobby.”

Tolkien also wrote *Leaf by Niggle* in this period. It’s a tale about a little man who struggles his whole life to paint a picture no one seems to value ... only to discover one day that his painting is a reflection of Heaven itself.

## **Reading**

*[Parish] turned to the shepherd. ‘Are you a guide?’ he asked. ‘Could you tell me the name of this country?’ ‘Don’t you know?’ said the man. ‘It is Niggle’s Country. It is Niggle’s Picture, or most of it; a little of it is now Parish’s Garden.’ ‘Niggle’s Picture!’ said Parish in astonishment. ‘Did you think of all this, Niggle? I never knew you were so clever. Why didn’t you tell me?’ ‘He*

*tried to tell you long ago,' said the man; 'but you would not look. He had only got canvas and paint in those days, and you wanted to mend your roof with them. This is what you and your wife used to call Niggle's Nonsense, or That Daubing.'* 'But it did not look like this then, not real,' said Parish. 'No, it was only a glimpse then,' said the man; 'but you might have caught the glimpse, if you had ever thought it worth while to try.'

**John Dickson:** Can we turn to Tolkien's actual works now? Um, they are deeply theological, but not in the way. Uh, Lewis's, *Nia*, uh, series, uh, was, was theological. Um, so can you tell us about his approach, Tolkien's approach? It wasn't Christian parable or allegory, and yet it was Christian. Can you help us navigate that?

**Alison Milbank:** Mm-hmm. Well, of course, talking route, um, and was very interested in Anglo-Saxon and Nordic. Mythology, and if you've ever read the *Poetic Edda*, um, this is the, the myths of the Norseman, but as interpreted by a Christian writer.



## John Dickson (studio)

Hey, if you want to know more about the Old Norse Poetic Edda (and the Prose Edda) head to our double episode on the Vikings (one of my personal favourites): it's titled The Vikings, and it's episodes 65 and 66.

It turns out a medieval Christian named Snorri Sturluson was the guy who preserved the largest collection of ancient pagan Norse mythology - true story.

**Alison Milbank:** So he makes it sound almost like a kind of pagan Old Testament. So you see things that look forward to an eschatological view of reality and things like that. So that. I would suggest that what Tolkien thought he was doing with Middle Earth, which remember is supposed to be set in our world and other worlds, but they lead, you know, there is converse between them.

Um, Very, very far back in history. So it's almost as if talking is writing a kind of mythology for England than England before Christianity, but one that makes Christianity good to think and which is imbued with a kind of sense of the whole world as a divine artifact. So

it's, um, it, it's a kind of world that doesn't have, um, a lot of religious practices in it, though.

It's undergirded from his collection of the myths that undergirded it, the silver meridian with a whole myth of its creation. As the elves understand it, the elves do worship. One of the, the kind of angelic figures, the lady berth, the star kindler, they sing hymns to her to rather like hymns to the Virgin Mary or something.

**John Dickson:** Hmm. Um, some might see, uh, some more sort of conservative Christians might see Tolkien's, uh, love of pagan myth as suspicious and scandalous. Uh, what might he have said in reply?

**Alison Milbank:** Well, you probably know that I think he's very highly influenced by GK Chesterton, and Chesterton famously says that only Christianity makes Paganism safe to play that.

I mean, just as C. S. Lewis includes forms in *Nia*. So for Tolkien, um, All kind of creatures are there. All, all searchings after religious truth have a certain truth in them as essays towards the one truth. So, um, I, I, I

think he wouldn't find, he wouldn't find this problematic whatsoever. Yes.

**John Dickson:** In what sense does Christianity make the pagan myths safe, is it, is it that it, um, takes the sort of evil, domineering power out of them and that, and that therefore we can enjoy them as stories, uh, of human longing? Or is it something else?

**Alison Milbank:** I. I, I think you are right. I think it is that they are, they are stories of the human longing and they have within them a sense of the sacredness of nature, for example, and things like this.

And it's a bit like new age religion nowadays. Um, okay. It's nice to venerate nature, but if you worship nature, you can worship things that are quite violent. And, uh, you know, the, the, it, it's, it's not all kind of pretty flowers. It's, um, you know, it's quite a lot of cruelty so that you, you need to sort of place the, the pagan religious impulse and the good side of it within a Christian view of the universe.

Where you can go and venerate holy wells. They're kind of, um, as Christians have done of course, throughout

the centuries. Uh, but I think that's the kind of thing that, uh, Chetan meant. And I think talking would be very, very sympathetic to, you can see it in his work on the poem Beowulf, which he writes about almost again, as a work by a Christian set.

In a pagan world, um, which it is very much because it, it set in a world of kind of pagan belief, but it kind of includes within its certain kind of biblical remarks, which show that, you know, it's kind of written from a, a kind of Christian perspective on that pagan world looking at what's in it. I, I've always been struck by that.

**John Dickson:** Um, approach that you find in Chean and, and, and Lewis and, and Tolkien, but earlier, as you say, in, in those sort of Christian Nordic writers, snorty snores, for example. Yeah. Um, they're, they're not scared of Paganism in the way that modern Christianity is. Uh, can you put your finger on why? Why do they feel so free to be affirming of these naughty, naughty, pagan things?

**Alison Milbank:** Well, I think they all have a certain either Anglican or Catholic with a small sea kind of understanding of the goodness of creation. And they do

not separate nature and grace in quite the way that some reform Christians, for example, might do. And for this reason, they are able to recuperate. As kind of natural religion, all sorts of things that we might call Pagan.

**John Dickson:** I want to ask you about fairytales. Um, obviously Lewis and Chesterton were also into fairytales and, and wrote about it, but, um, Tolkien did as well, and in fact he wrote an essay, did he not? On fair fairytales? Can you, can you tell us what his approach to fairytales was and what I, I guess, you know what we can learn because. Obviously, um, people aren't into fairytales anymore.

**Alison Milbank:** Mm-hmm. Well talking has a lot to say about fairytales and about the whole realm of fairy, which is a particular kind of estrangement from our world so that we return to it. So, um, fairytales allow the recovery of a vision of reality by taking us on a little kind of holiday away from our normal view of the world. Just as in a fairy story, somebody may be taken away from his normal reality by the queen of the ferries or

something, and then returns like Thomas the Rimer most famously.

So what you gain from fairytales is they, they allow you to escape. That's the first thing. Escape from death. Escape into being able to talk to animals. Escape from the nastiness of the modern industrial complex in talking's view. But then they restore the real world to you. So fairytales have very ordinary things in them.

Bread and apples and trees and shoes, and those become. Enchanted, if you like, by the fairytale, by the fact that you might, in the tale of the 12 dancing princesses, there are golden apples and silver pears. But you read the story in such a way as you return to our world with the deeper understanding of the reality and the beauty of ordinary apples and ordinary issues.

Mm-hmm. And ordinary people. Okay. Um, that's the, the main way that he thinks that fantasy and fairytales can work. Um, and the happy ending is the other thing, which he calls you catastrophe because it's not just kind of, oh, everything in the garden's lovely. It's just you take people to the absolute pits of danger. Horror, whatever. And then there is this sudden turn by which

good comes in the happy ending, but it comes in like grace. It comes in from without a sudden miraculous grace that you can never be sure will return, never to be relied on.

## **Reading**

*“The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending: or more correctly of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous “turn” (for there is no true end to any fairy-tale): this joy, which is one of the things which fairy-stories can produce supremely well, is not essentially “escapist,” nor “fugitive.” In its fairy-tale--or otherworld--setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of dyscatastrophe, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is evangelium, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.*

*It is the mark of a good fairy-story, of the higher or more complete kind, that however wild its events, however fantastic or terrible the adventures, it can give to child or*

*man that hears it, when the “turn” comes, a catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart, near to (or indeed accompanied by) tears, as keen as that given by any form of literary art, and having a peculiar quality ... In such stories when the sudden “turn” comes we get a piercing glimpse of joy, and heart's desire, that for a moment passes outside the frame, rends indeed the very web of story, and lets a gleam come through.”*

### ***On Fairy Stories, JRR Tolkien***

**John Dickson:** Do you see that as, um, his Christian eschatology, uh, directing his thoughts?

**Alison Milbank:** He, he says it is, he has this whole section at the end of fairy stories where he has all this stuff about the gospel as the greatest fairy story. I. But a fairy story that comes true. And in the end, of course, he thinks all our stories in far as we write about the good, the true and the beautiful will all come true in the eschaton and in fact, in heaven, we will write more stories, we will play more music, we will make more songs because Art for Him goes on and on into the eschaton.



## **John Dickson (studio)**

The 'eschaton' is the final event in the divine plan - what Christians refer to as the apocalypse. It's the point at which God's plan culminates, the fulfilment of history.

Tolkien's mythology contained its own eschaton - his own final moment when good would triumph over evil, where Eru Ilúvatar (eh-rue Ill-oo-va-tar) would step in, and the mystery of his cosmos would be revealed.

It's one of those fascinating points where Tolkien's faith brushes up against his fiction.

Tolkien certainly believed he was doing much more than just telling interesting tales. He was participating in a myth-making that found its culmination in the one true story that gives all myths meaning.

"The Gospels contain a fairy story," he wrote, "or a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy stories." "But," he continued, "this story has entered History and the primary world."

Stay with us ...

## **BREAK**

### **John Dickson (studio)**

Tolkien's extended family were mostly Baptists. So when Tolkien's mum Mabel joined the Roman Catholic Church, they were strongly opposed. I'm sad to say, they cut her off, financially, even though she was a recent widow and single mum of two. I don't think that's a particularly Baptist thing to do ... but, oh dear, do Christians sometimes suck!!

It was parish priest - Father Morgan - who made Tolkien's family life bearable. He was something of a jolly uncle to Mabel and to her two sons. And he was the kids guardian when she died.

"My own dear mother was a martyr indeed,' Tolkien wrote, "and it is not to everybody that God grants so easy a way to his great gifts as he did to Hilary and

myself, giving us a mother who killed herself with labour and trouble to ensure us keeping the faith.”

**John Dickson:** So then Alison, how, how influential was, uh, Catholicism, uh, for Tolkien, uh, the, the Catholicism of his mother and uh, and then I guess of this priest who, um, took him under his wing?

**Alison Milbank:** It was the centre of his life. He went to the Eucharist at certain points of his life every day. And, um, and it influences everything he does, though, not in a very obvious way sometimes.

Hmm. It, it, it, it influenced everything. And, uh, the Eucharist in particular was very important to him. He said it was the heart of everything.

### **John Dickson (studio)**

The Eucharist or Communion or Lord’s Supper is the central bit of the Catholic church service. It’s where the bread and wine representing Christ’s body and blood are consumed. Except in Catholicism, as in the

Orthodox Church, that bread *is* (in a mysterious sense) Christ's body, and that wine *is* his blood.

The meal (if you can call it that) is super important in all brands of Christianity but for Catholics, it's the centre. It's where Christ's sacrifice for sins is "re-presented, its memory perpetuated until the end of the world, and its salutary power be applied to the forgiveness of the sins we daily commit." That's actually a quote from the Catholic Catechism if you're wondering.

Anyway, what's so interesting is that Tolkien saw Christ's life, death, and resurrection as the central story of the world, but he didn't believe in writing *about it* in his stories, not even in a metaphorical way.

He hated allegory. He believed stories should exist for their own sake. And if they're good stories—truly epic stories—they will, by the very nature of the universe God has made, point to the Good that is God himself.

There are Jesus types in the Lord of the Rings, but only in the sense that the highest ideals found across humanity are all found knit together in the one God-Man Jesus.

So there's Gandalf who returns exalted after what looks like his death ... there's Frodo who sacrifices himself for the good of all ... and there's Eowyn the unlikely shield-maiden who, though not a typical heroic soldier, ends up slaying the Witch-King.

And, perhaps the most striking of all, the future king in the travel-stained cloak: Aragorn.

### ***Lord of the Rings movie excerpt***

#### **John Dickson (studio)**

Sorry, Director Mark insisted on another scene from Jackson's *Lord of the Rings*. It is perhaps the most stirring pre-battle sequence since the "They cannot take our freedom" scene in *BraveHeart*. Producer Kaley and I are big fans of that one! (It's got too much real-world history for Director Mark, of course!).

Anyway, Tolkien isn't only about swords and empires!

**John Dickson:** I'm wondering then about, um, the way Tolkien departs from the ancient pagan Saxon Warrior

myth. Um, the heroes of say the Lord of the Rings and the Hobbit are unlikely heroes. Are they not? Can, can you, can you talk to us about what you think Tolkien is doing in giving us this particular kind of hero?

**Alison Milbank:** Well, I, I think it has a theological reading really because you have your epic heroes like Aragon, um, but then you have your Hobbit heroes and they are the real heroes, but they are the little people, you know, he has brought down the mighty from their seat and has exalted the humble and Meek as Mary sings and the Magnifi Act, and that's very much what happens.

In the Lord of the Rings. So yes, Aragon is the king, and Aragon does all sorts of brave things. But these little hobbits, partly because of their humility and their awareness of their littleness, are able to do astonishing things that nobody else could do because, you know, um, the evil one looks out siron and he doesn't rate them.

And therefore he misses them, uh, till too late. And, um, that is very, very important to talking. I think the sense of their humility and their smallness and their

everydayness. It's almost as if he's, um, taking sort of comic characters and giving them a kind of epic adventure. Yeah, so the humble hero, um, that really isn't a pagan motif.

**John Dickson:** So, uh, so that can only have come, uh, from his Christianity.

**Alison Milbank:** Yes, uh, absolutely. In fact, Tom Holland's book, *dominion* is all about the fact that there is no such thing as. Treating ordinary people as of worth and value, literally making them the heroes till you get to the New Testament in St. Peter. So, you know, it has to be a, a particularly kind of Christian insight, though of course, once Christianity brought it in.

It obviously ends as Western culture. Um, but for talking it's very, very deliberate, I think in, in the way that he does it. And certainly when you see, uh, Mary and a o n defeating the nasal. Tolkien almost moves into the Magnificat in the way that he frames that whole encounter. So it's done in very high erratic, poetic language.

I. But almost as if it were partly a sort of ancient epic and partly the King James version of the Bible. And it is a little tiny hobbit and a woman disguised as a man, fighting as a warrior who were able between them through their weakness. To defeat the, the nasal and the witch king because the witch king has had a prophecy that no man can defeat him.

Well, no man does. It's a hobbit and a woman, but, you know, again, it's, it's through their, their weakness that they are able to do it. Hmm. Wonderful.

## **John Dickson (studio)**

Let's press pause. I've got a 5 minute Jesus for you.

I hope I'm not being overly biased in suggesting that Christ was the original servant leader, the one who lowers, humbles, and sacrifices himself for those he leads.



And the classic scene that underlines the idea is this one, from John 13:

*It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; <sup>4</sup> so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. <sup>5</sup> After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.*

The opening line is ominous.

Jesus has long said his mission would climax at the Passover, where he would offer up his own life, like the 'lamb' that was sacrificed at Passover.

And now here we are, “just before the Passover Festival”.

It’s time for Jesus to reveal a crucial lesson, a final lesson, to his closest followers.

So, he stands up and does the most bizarre thing imaginable: he washes his students’ feet.

But the narrator—John, one of the eyewitnesses of all this—wants to tell us one more thing before he narrates the foot-washing.

He reminds us of Christ’s authority.

**v.3** *“Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God*

*and was returning to God; 4 so he got up from the meal ...”*

Imagine you've never heard this story before.

What would you expect to follow such a description of absolute authority?

All the power of God the Father is in the hands of God the Son, “so he got up from the meal ...” *and??*

... he performed some sign of his supremacy?

... told them how to conquer the world?

No.

He performed the task of a household servant:

*v.4b "... took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. 5 After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him."*

I imagine stunned silence, initially.

Over the last few of years, the disciples have learnt to go with the flow of whatever Jesus proposes.

But *this* is pushing the limits.

And, naturally, it's Peter who pipes up and says, "No, Lord, you shall never wash my feet."

Just parenthetically, it is remarkable that across the diversity of the four Gospels, we get the same impression of the personality of Peter.

He's always presented as a leader, of course—that's just a simple organisational fact.

But the striking thing is that he comes across (in all four Gospels; and a letter of Paul, by the way)

... as a boundless enthusiast ...

... who regularly puts his foot in his mouth.

Only genuine historical reporting could maintain such a consistent psychological profile across diverse sources.

Anyway, that's just for free today!

The real point is: Peter says what everyone was thinking:

“No way, Lord! You are King. You don’t wash our feet. We wash yours! (remember, Mary—she washed your feet)!”

The original Greek is wildly adamant: it literally says:

“Not ever shall you wash my feet *eis ton aiōna* ... into *eternity!*”

I suppose we might say, “Never in a million years will you wash my feet!”

Spare a thought for Peter.

The notion of ‘Servant Leadership’ hadn’t been invented yet.

In fact, that expression was only coined in the 1970 management book by Robert K. Greenleaf. It's title is ... 'Servant Leadership'.

Now there's even a *Center for Servant Leadership*.

But Peter's in the middle of the invention of the idea right here!

Peter's culture prized honour & power, above pretty much everything else.

Jesus had taught them about compassion and love, of course ...

... but *washing feet* was a complete reversal of the honour-shame outlook of the ancient world.

According to the cultural norms of Mediterranean society, what's happening here would be seen ...

... as the most *honourable* man in the world effectively shaming himself before his admirers!

So, Jesus responds (v.7) "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand."

In a way, Jesus on his knees like a servant is preparation for what his followers will see the next day.

At the Passover, Jesus will be on a cross like a criminal, according to his own teaching bearing the wrongs of the world, atoning for our faults.

But this isn't only theology. Jesus immediately follows up with these words:



*14. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. 15 I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.*

The foot-washing isn't only a sign of Christ's humble sacrifice on the cross;

*it's also a simple 'example' to follow (v.15).*

Christians haven't always got this right.

Sometimes they've pursued their own honour, protection, and power.

They haven't got on their knees like a servant and ... served the world.

And served not just each other as their club, but the world, even a world that sometimes doesn't like the church.

John's Gospel makes a point of saying that Judas, the betrayer of Jesus, was there at that meal.

In fact, it's immediately after this scene that Judas leaves to collect his payment for turning against Jesus.

And Jesus knew this.

And he still got on his knees and washed the betrayer's feet.

In JRR Tolkien's language, this is the great fairy-tale of the upending of all things. It's the ultimate myth.

Except, as Tolkien also says, “this story [this fairy tale] has entered History.”

You can press play now.

### **John Dickson (studio)**

It's easy to appreciate *The Lord of the Rings* as a wonderful novel today, but when Tolkien was writing he had a hard time convincing people it was worthwhile - his publishers Allen & Unwin just wanted a 'Hobbit 2'.

This enormous book was viewed sceptically - the sheer commercial expense of producing a novel more than a thousand pages long would put it well beyond the reach of the average reader.

It was eventually released as three volumes - and what followed was a series of editorial mistakes and helpful 'corrections' that became the bane of Tolkien's existence.

Which left little time for the mammoth collection he had been working on long before he ever dreamt of Hobbits - *The Silmarillion*, the epic mythology that sits behind all of his Middle Earth tales.

## READING 8

*Some have puzzled over the relation between Tolkien's stories and his Christianity, and have found it difficult to understand how a devout Roman Catholic could write with such conviction about a world where God is not worshipped. But there is no mystery. The Silmarillion is the work of a profoundly religious man. It does not contradict Christianity but complements it. There is in the legends no worship of God, yet God is indeed there, more explicitly in The Silmarillion than in the work that grew out of it, The Lord of the Rings.*

*When he wrote The Silmarillion Tolkien believed that in one sense he was writing the truth. He did not suppose that precisely such peoples as he described, 'elves', 'dwarves', and malevolent 'orcs', had walked the earth and done the deeds that he recorded. But he did feel, or hope, that his stories were in some sense an embodiment of a profound truth. This is not to say that*

*he was writing an allegory: far from it. Time and again he expressed his distaste for that form of literature. 'I dislike allegory wherever I smell it,' he once said, and similar phrases echo through his letters to readers of his books.*

*Certainly while writing *The Silmarillion* Tolkien believed that he was doing more than inventing a story. He wrote of the tales that make up the book: 'They arose in my mind as "given" things, and as they came, separately, so too the links grew. An absorbing, though continually interrupted labour (especially, even apart from the necessities of life, since the mind would wing to the other pole and spread itself on the linguistics): yet always I had the sense of recording what was already "there", somewhere: not of "inventing".'*

***Humphrey Carpenter, *J. R. R. Tolkien: A Biography****

**John Dickson (studio)**

Tolkien never lived to see the publication of *The Silmarillion* - it was compiled and edited by his son, Christopher.

Tolkien's inability to come to grips with this life-long work led to a darkness of thought that troubled his final days.

From his diary:

*"Life is grey and grim. I can get nothing done, between staleness and boredom (confined to quarters), and anxiety and distraction. What am I going to do? Be sucked down into residence in a hotel or old people's home or club, without books or contacts or talk with men? God help me!"*

And these days were compounded by a cooling of his friendship with CS Lewis.

**John Dickson:** Did he have a falling out with CS Lewis? Um, I mean, I've read in various places. Yeah. That they, you know, they, they walked apart, you know, in the end. But is that, is that the case?

**Alison Milbank:** I think it was very much to do with, with, um, is taking up with his wife. I think Tolkien was a bit cool about joy and that whole thing. Um, so they did become less close to each other, though each of them has made a wonderful statement about the other in

different places. And I think Lewis was behind, you know, sort of trying to do things for Tolkien later on in life. And he, I think, supported CS Lewis's chair when he moved to Cambridge.

So, you know, they, they, they didn't exactly fall out, but they, they just sort of separated and I mean, Tolkien was never as keen on people like Charles Williams, who, if you knew a bit about Charles Williams, I mean, I love Charles Williams' novels, his spiritual thrillers, but he certainly did go in for some occult practices that involve some slightly cranky things ... to do with nakedness and swords that we won't, you know, go to. But Tolkien would've had no time for any of this, you know, whereas Lewis was a great admirer of, of Charles Williams. So I think that, you know, that didn't help sort of

**John Dickson:** Did Tolkien write about Lewis upon Lewis's death. I mean, Lewis died 10 years before Tolkien, but I mean,

**Alison Milbank:** Yes, he, he wrote, very positively about him and about their friendship.

## John Dickson (studio)

C. S. Lewis died on 22 November 1963, aged sixty-four. A few days later, Tolkien wrote to his daughter Priscilla: ‘So far I have felt the normal feelings of a man of my age – like an old tree that is losing all its leaves one by one: this feels like an axe-blow near the roots.’

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien died in his beloved Oxford on September 2, 1973.

He had moved away to Bournemouth for the health of his wife Edith, but he returned upon her death, to become a Fellow of Merton College.

Tolkien loved the stimulation Oxford provided and the company of what he described as ‘men of my own kind’.

He kept plugging away at *The Silmarillion*, but the final story that would be published in his lifetime was one he wrote and shared with Edith.

*Smith of Wootton Major* is a story about a man who swallows a star and for most of his years is able to walk through the enchanted land of Faerie.



But a time comes when he eventually has to return this gift to the King of Faerie ... and it's something he struggles with, but is ultimately able to do with peace and thankfulness.

## READING

*'Do you not think, Master Smith,' said Alf, 'that it is time for you to give this thing up?'*

*'What is that to you, Master Cook?' he answered. 'And why should I do so? Isn't it mine? It came to me, and may a man not keep things that come to him so, at the least as a remembrance?'*

*'Some things. Those that are free gifts and given for remembrance. But others are not so given. They cannot belong to a man for ever, nor be treasured as heirlooms. They are lent. You have not thought, perhaps, that someone else may need this thing. But it is so.'*

**John Dickson (studio)**

When Tolkien died, he was carried to this unassuming cemetery in the grounds of St Peters Catholic church in Wolvercote.

It wasn't in the heart of his beloved Oxford - there was only limited graveyard space for Roman Catholics at the time.

When he died, he had his wife Edith's body removed to this place so that they could lie together.

It seems a bit suburban for someone who dreamt up an amazing mythological world.

But if you look closely at the tombstone, you will see that Tolkien named himself 'Beren', and Edith, 'Luthien' - the man who fell in love with an elven princess, the characters of his greatest love story.

**John Dickson:** The late Tim Keller, the, the famous American, uh, pastor who recently passed away, said that he never stopped reading Tolkien, never. He would just cycle through Tolkien's works, um, all the way through his life.

Why do you think Tolkien has such a hold. On people?

**Alison Milbank:** Well, I think it's the nature of his world and the way he writes. So when you read a Tolkien novel, you know you can go as deeply as you like, and Tolkien would've gone more deeply. And that's the way he writes. But the Ready experience is of a world that is good no matter how many bad things happen and how much cruelty there is, and how much failure there is, it is good all the way down.

And that reality is. Deeper than we realize. So if you ever wanted to use it, I mean, he was a great apologist to Keller. Um, I think you need to begin with people by convincing them that the world we are in is not a limited materialist world, but a world that has a kind of unending depth and significance and truths and radiance about it.

And I think you get that from reading Tolkien. So if you are ever feeling, um, sort of depressed or anything, I mean, it does change people's lives. I was once at a Greyhound bus stop in, uh, Richmond, Virginia, and the bus was late, so often happens with Greyhound buses

and there were three young men there and they'd all read Tolkien and I'd just been to give a Tolkien talk.

One had changed his job. Which was some kind of research into sort of biological weapons because of reading Tolkien. One was walking the Way because of Tolkien, and one was going to see a girl that he felt was influenced by his reading of Tolkien. It does change your life, so I can understand why somebody would spend their life reading, talking.

**John Dickson:** Yes. It, it's such a different, I mean, just as you speak about that, um, it just reminds me of something my wife and I have, um, felt in our, this is quite shallow in our TV watching or our Netflix watching. Um, how many shows nowadays are ultimately nihilistic that the badness of the world. Is the base of the world, whether we're talking about, uh, uh, comic McCarthy's, uh, the road, uh, you know, that, that novel, um, and I think it's been made in the movie, um, or you think of the, the TV show Breaking Bad, which everyone says is one of the greatest TV shows ever.

Um, there's, it's just dark all the way down. And, and people sometimes praise it as saying It's realistic. It's

realistic, but actually I long for the ability to look. Darkness in the face, and yet, no, that isn't the, the base of reality. And what you're saying is that Tolkien gives us exactly that. Yet it's a choice.

**Alison Milbank:** You either have an ontology of violence or an ontology of peace. Um, as my husband would say that, um, and you choose. It doesn't mean you don't look on the dark side as you say it. It doesn't mean that you don't realize the depth. In fact, it requires much more courage to look at all this and still see that the world is good.

**John Dickson:** My last question, Alison, how has, uh, studying Tolkien's work for years influenced your own life? And dare I ask faith?

**Alison Milbank:** I read it quite late because when I was a little girl, I read *The Hobbit*, but I thought talking was for boys. Um, and if you watch the films, you might think it's all about walls, but in fact there's much more about the weather than anything else that they have to deal with when you are, when you are in there.

Um, for me, it helps me particularly to think about the role of creativity. I. It, it really helps me apologetically. Because I do find it a helpful way to talk to people. Um, it's helped me towards my growing interest in eco theology because of Tolkien's own very, very strong commitments, not just to the value of nature, but to the agency of nature.

In his natural world, plants, creatures, trees are all active partners and I think what Pope Francis calls an integral ecology. So it's influenced my theology of nature, um, but it continues to give me hope. However melancholy things are, and Toki can be very, very melancholy. There is something very also almost utopian about him.

## **John Dickson (studio)**

Melancholic about the sadnesses in life ...

And yet strangely hopeful, even utopian ...

That was Tolkien's life, really, from the death of his father ... then mother ... and all through the publishing

struggles and lonely end ... but with a sense of pressing on “toward home” where all things will be well.

That’s death and resurrection. The true myth that entered history.

So let me end with the words of the humble Sam Gamgee to Frodo, words about pressing on through the troubles, through the sadness, onwards toward home.

This whole episode was Director Mark’s idea, so it’s only right that he takes us out with the words of Sam Gamgee:

## READING

*“The brave things in the old tales and songs, Mr. Frodo: adventures, as I used to call them. I used to think that they were things the wonderful folk of the stories went out and looked for, because they wanted them, because they were exciting and life was a bit dull, a kind of a sport, as you might say. But that’s not the way of it with the tales that really mattered, or the ones that stay in the mind. Folk seem to have been just landed in them, usually – their paths were laid that way, as you put it.*”

*But I expect they had lots of chances, like us, of turning back, only they didn't. And if they had, we shouldn't know, because they'd have been forgotten. We hear about those as just went on — and not all to a good end, mind you; at least not to what folk inside a story and not outside it call a good end. You know, coming home, and finding things all right, though not quite the same — like old Mr Bilbo. But those aren't always the best tales to hear, though they may be the best tales to get landed in! I wonder what sort of a tale we've fallen into?"*