

## HARRY POTTER: FRIEND OR FOE?

St John's Church, Ludlow, 31st August 2003  
Sermon by Sir Leslie Fielding, Lay Reader

*“Josiah got rid of all who called up ghosts and spirits, of all households gods and idols and all the loathsome objects seen in the land of Judah and in Jerusalem, so that he might fulfil the requirements of the law”.* (2 Kings 23, v.24)

Most of you will be aware of the Harry Potter phenomenon. It is hard to be unaware. Bookshops are stacked with these works – five so far; the latest is “Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix”; two more in the series are still to come.

It all started in a café in Edinburgh where Joanne Rowling used to take her baby daughter, to stay warm and write. She was an out of work teacher and divorcee, living on the dole and writing to keep her spirits up. Today, she is remarried and a multi-millionaire. Over 50 million copies have been sold in 130 countries, translated into about 30 languages. As long as three years back, I saw them in German, in almost every shop window in Bavaria, when I was on my way to the miracle play at Oberammergau. The books appeal to adults as well as children. The phenomenon has already attracted critical attention. A Chaplains' retreat at the University of Sussex in 2001 was devoted to the subject. I have since read a learned article on Harry Potter by a Professor of English; a book on “The Spirituality of Potter World” by the Head of an Anglican Theological College; and, finally, 479 pages of a source book for teachers (“Exploring Harry Potter”) published in the US, which talks, inter alia, of the place of Harry Potter among the “Archetypes” of Carl Jung's “Collective Unconscious”.

The hero, Harry Potter, is a teenage wizard attending a boarding school in Scotland, Hogwarts College, whose headmaster is an arch-wizard and “goodie”, Professor Dumbledore. Potter and Dumbledore are locked in conflict with a Dark Lord, Voldemort. The world is divided into a majority of ordinary people like us, called “muggles”, and a minority of wizards, witches, werewolves, magical beasts, Death-Eaters, Aurors, Dementors, and the rest. The wizard world is one in which portraits talk to you from their frames, photographs are alive and playing cards are self-shuffling. There is even, in parallel to normal “muggle” government, a Ministry of Magic run by civil servants and headed by a stupid and self-seeking Minister called Fudge. Harry has close school chums, Hermione, Ron and others, who help him through his scrapes. Harry himself, while marked out for a heroic destiny in the great battle between good and evil, is also very much an ordinary teenager; touselled, occasionally rebellious and at times uncertain, lonely and afraid. As he grows older, through the series, he becomes more moody. The books, while often funny and with real life human characters, are also cast in an epic mould recalling Tolkien's “The Lord of the Rings” and C.S. Lewis's, “Tales of Narnia”. And J.K. Rowling does not pull her punches in her depiction of evil.

Unlike C.S. Lewis's children's stories, however, and (to a lesser degree), Tolkien's, religion is not written between the lines. There is no inferred or underpinning Christian theology. God is not referred to. There is no heaven, or eternity or resurrection. There is no Christ, or Christ-like figure comparable to C.S. Lewis's Aslan. Christmas is celebrated at Hogwarts College, but in exclusively secular terms – holly, Christmas trees, feasting and presents. There is no Nativity and no going to Church. On the other hand, there are various ghosts (mostly friendly) and poltergeists. There is a great deal of casting of spells and

invocation of supernatural powers. Also a range of evil beings, dangerous creatures, scary happenings, violence and even death.

Not entirely unsurprisingly, therefore, voices have been raised, mainly in America, and among a fringe of sincere Christian believers, to express suspicion of the Harry Potter books and doubts as to their suitability for young people. It is argued that, in making magic so funny and charming, they encourage children to take a tolerant 'New Age' view of witchcraft, rather than support a Christian view of creation. A parents' organisation in South Carolina has accused J.K. Rowling of glorifying sorcery and the occult and indirectly causing increased violence in schools. It has been suggested, by some Bible-belt Christians, that the very popularity and commercial success of the Harry Potter books is due to the influence of satanic forces. In Michigan, some schools are said to require parental permission for pupils to read Harry Potter. There has been a move against these popular works of fiction in the odd primary school even in this country.

In my view, Christians should not go along with this extreme and somewhat panicky view – not just because (which is probably the case) we can't do anything about it, but also because such criticism is misconceived and wide of the mark. Without investing the Harry Potter books with a cosmic significance they do not possess, a positive approach is the right one – perhaps even, in some respects, an enthusiastic one.

Let me take sorcery first. Just because, in today's world, its manifestations are nugatory and ludicrous, does not mean that religious people can dismiss it out of hand as insignificant. When it comes to the dark side (and I concede that not all witchcraft is absolutely and utterly evil, as opposed to merely superstitious and misguided), I tend to agree with C.S. Lewis that there are twin dangers to be avoided – on the one hand, of entirely dismissing the seriousness of the demonic: and on the other hand, of taking it too seriously.

But the point about the Harry Potter books is that the magic and wizardry in them are morally neutral – a set of forces which can be used either for evil or for good. There is a parallel here, in the real world, with science and technology. We are quite right to be exercised by their misapplication – for example, in the arms trade and in the dissemination of weapons of mass destruction; or in the threat posed to the environment of the planet by needless industrial pollution. But we are also dependant on science and technology for our material well being, physical health and economic hopes for the future. It is the use we make of these modern forces that raises the real issue, not the forces themselves. To shift terrain, Macbeth is not a play about witchcraft, even if it plays a role. It is about power, greed, guilt and the ultimate triumph of good over self-destruction and murder. The same can be said of Joanne Rowling's work. And she was probably right, when she hit back at her critics and said "I have yet to meet a single child who has told me that they want to be a Satanist, or are particularly interested in the occult, because of my books".

Which brings me to the morality and ethics of Potterworld. These books are in fact intensely moral. They uphold the good and encourage opposition to evil. They assume freewill rather than determinism, in a thoroughly Biblical way. They teach that the ends do not always justify the means. "As in most mythical tales, this is a moral and ordered world, telling us abiding truths about the human story", writes Canon June Osborne, in *The Times*. She points out that "the strongest message at the heart of these stories is the all-conquering power of love. Harry owes his life, and evil its downfall, to an act of self-sacrifice". (I should explain here that Harry Potter's mother has died in attempting to save him, as an infant, from a murder

attempted by Lord Voldemort – and unwittingly thereby conferred upon her son a lasting power of resistance). The central theme of Harry Potter is undoubtedly, self-sacrificial love.

Helpfully, from our Christian point of view, one of several of Joanne Rowling's great strengths is her ability, as well as using black and white, to develop the story also in shades of grey, in the same way that we in Church experience the ambiguities and perplexities of our daily lives. If Magic is not the key component, human Character certainly is. Harry Potter, while capable of courage and heroism, is as imperfect as any boy would be; at times bad tempered, inconsiderate, disrespectful of the rules and open to moral temptation. More generally in these books, as in real life, people are not always what they seem – apparently bad people turn out to have redeeming features, while apparently good people turn out to have the occasional serious flaw of character. Somewhat negative characters, like Sirius Black and Professor Severus Snape, have morally redeeming qualities. Joanne Rowling encourages us to show mercy and not to rush to judgment; and she depicts life as a moral struggle in sometimes unclear circumstances – for example, when Harry has to do something that is urgent and right; but must break rules to do so, and forego outside advice and assistance.

So I think our response to Potterworld – as individual Christians and as the Church – needs to be positive rather than over-critical. There may be more *Christian* children's books about the battle between good and evil (like the Rev. Graham Taylor's new "Shadowmancer"). But there are also anti-clerical ones (the series "His Dark Materials" by the self-proclaimed atheist Philip Pullman). Theologically, we should not write off J.K. Rowling's story of acts of love, self-sacrifice and mercy, as being "ungodly", merely because God remains unmentioned. After all, in the real world, is not the love of God at work through the Holy Spirit, even when human beings refuse to acknowledge Him? Preaching in Athens, St Paul managed to be critically positive about Zeus. And there is considerably more common ground and shared values between Christianity and Potterworld than between the Catholic and Apostolic Church and the cult of Jupiter.

Compared to the tide of trash and moral relativism that has engulfed our film and TV screens, the Potter books are therefore to be praised for their ethical backbone and seriousness; for the value they place on loyalty, honesty, trust and courage. Far from amounting to a denial of the Christian gospel, the Harry Potter series can open a way to encourage both children and adults to ask questions about truth and good and evil, in a way to which our present generation is all too unaccustomed. As one Church of England cleric puts it, "If this is not opening the door to the Gospel, I don't know what is".

But I will not finish this sermon on too high a note. Fashions in literature come and go. While Tolkein has lasted, Rowling may not. Today's top hit may be tomorrow's remaindered paperback. Harry Potter, despite the "guff" of literary commentators, is not a "Cultural Ikon". Probably Joanne Rowling's Christian critics have taken her much too seriously. No doubt I have too, in what I have said this morning. So, I will conclude in purely secular terms, as follows.

It is something to be thankful for that these five books are written in very good English, correctly punctuated and with a serious and well-chosen vocabulary. It is also quite a welcome development, in this dumbed-down age of sound bites and television gawping, that millions of children have been persuaded actually to sit down and read really long books – the latest Harry Potter runs to 766 pages! If you add to that, that they are great fun, as well as a thoroughly

moral read, the Church of England can rest content. In preparing for The Last Things, and living as best we can the Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ in a society in England that is changing rapidly under our feet, we can at least also comfort ourselves with small mercies. Thanks be to God.