

Sunday 31 July 2011

10 a.m.

Laurieston Parish Church  
Morning Worship

Welcome/Notices

Introit: Give thanks (MP 170)

Call to Worship

HYMN 127: O worship the King

Story Time

Prayer with song: Goodness is stronger than evil;

O.T. Reading: 1 Samuel 17: 41-51 *David defeats Goliath* p. 283

Prayer of approach and confession

The Lord's Prayer

N.T. Reading: Ephesians 6: 10-20 *The armour of God* p. 245

HYMN 515: Soldiers of Christ, arise

Sermon: *Harry Potter and the Power of Myth*

HYMN 535: Who would true valour see

Offering

Choir Voluntary: I am weak but thou art strong (MP 263)

Prayer of dedication, thanksgiving & intercession

HYMN 476: Mine eyes have seen the glory

Benediction & Sung Amen

**Welcome/Notices**

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**Introit:** Give thanks (MP 170)

Give thanks with a grateful heart;  
give thanks to the Holy One;  
give thanks, because he's given Jesus Christ his son.  
Give thanks with a grateful heart;  
give thanks to the Holy One;  
give thanks, because he's given Jesus Christ his son.  
And now let the weak say, 'I am strong';  
let the poor say 'I am rich';  
because of what the Lord has done for us.  
And now let the weak say, 'I am strong';  
let the poor say 'I am rich';  
because of what the Lord has done for us.  
Give thanks.

.....  
**Call to Worship:**

Sing a new song to the Lord; he has done wonderful things!  
by his own power and holy strength he has won the victory.  
The Lord announced his victory;  
he made his saving power known to the nations.  
He kept his promise to the people of Israel  
with loyalty and constant love for them.  
All people everywhere have seen the victory of our God.

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**HYMN 127:** O worship the King

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**Story Time**

Once upon a time, a baby boy was born, who had an amazing destiny ahead of him. For most of his childhood, he knew nothing

about this. In fact, he was the youngest of his family and never felt as strong or as clever or as important as the others. He got all the boring, unpleasant jobs to do while they went off on exciting adventures.

Then one day, when he was almost grown, a messenger came to the boy's home - a very unusual, exotic messenger, with an even stranger message that shocked the boy and astounded the rest of his family.

"This is the one", the messenger said. "This boy will achieve great things for his people. His power will defeat the forces of evil and his name will be remembered for generations to come".

Well, for a while, nothing happened, and life went on much as usual for the boy, except that he remembered what the messenger had said and wondered what it could possibly mean.

It was several years later that the great battle began. The boy's people were faced with an enemy so fearsome that the strongest warriors quaked at the mere mention of his name. No armour was any defence against him; no sword could kill him. The enemy was massively strong, seemingly invincible, raging with anger and spite - and somehow it seemed that his destiny and that of the boy were inextricably linked together.

They faced each other in the final battle. All the other warriors had melted into the background, watching, entranced and fearful as the powerful, battle-hardened champion towered over the young lad, who was vulnerable, inexperienced, but somehow also strangely calm and assured.

The two gazed at each other for what seemed like an eternity, and then the battle began. And when it ended, one fighter lay dead on the ground, while the other stood exhausted, but triumphant.

Against all the odds, against all logic and expectation, a young lad, armed only with courage and a powerful sense of justice, defended only by the power of love, had defeated the forces of evil - just as the messenger had foretold.

- ◆ Now the big question, who was that story about?
- ◆ Who was the young hero who defeated the fearsome enemy?
- ◆ Was it HARRY POTTER vs VOLDEMORT or DAVID v GOLIATH?
- ◆ The way I told it, it could have been either, and with a little bit of tweaking there are probably others that would have fitted the model, because these are classic tales that have been told in one form or another in every age and in every culture
- ◆ stories of good fighting against evil; stories where the forces of good are heavily outnumbered seem doomed to fail, but somehow, against all the odds, good triumphs
- ◆ we need to know, as human beings, that it is worth standing up for what we believe.... that might is not right.... that power doesn't lie ultimately in military force and weapons of war, or in venom and hatred.
- ◆ No-one put it better than Archbishop Desmond Tutu in the words that we're going to sing as part of our prayer:
  - Goodness is stronger than evil;
  - Love is stronger than hate;
  - Light is stronger than darkness;
  - Life is stronger than death.
  - Victory is ours, victory is ours
  - through him who loved us.

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## **LET US PRAY:**

God, we thank you for stories, ancient and modern, that fire our imagination, and have us sitting on the edge of our seat with excitement, not knowing until the last minute how they will end; stories that may or may not be true, but which remind us of something that undoubtedly is true:

Goodness is stronger than evil.....

We give thanks for heroes and heroines of the past who have stood up for what they believed to be right, even though they knew they might very well be killed; all who have shown what Jesus said was the greatest love of all - to give your life for a friend. We give thanks that their sacrifice was not wasted, for it is always true, and always has been, that:

Goodness is stronger than evil.....

We give thanks for Jesus, our greatest hero and our truest friend. For the stories he told; the people he healed; the person he was; the new way of living that he showed. He refused to fight; he refused to hate; he went on loving even the people who hated him, and proved once and for all that:

Goodness is stronger than evil.....

Loving God, help us, when we are put to the test, to live by the truth of these words. When we are tempted to get what we want by lying or cheating or stealing, help us to hold on to what is right. When we are angry and want to hurt other people back for the hurt that they have caused, help us to hold on to the power of love. When we feel despairing, when life seems dark and hopeless, give us light to see the way ahead, and courage to choose life instead of death. Help us always to remember the truth of these words:

Goodness is stronger than evil.....

Through the power of the one who loved us, and loves us still, the one whom death could not conquer, evil could not corrupt, Jesus Christ our saviour and friend.

AMEN

**O.T. Reading:** 1 Samuel 17: 41-51 *David defeats Goliath* p. 283

The Philistine started walking toward David, with his shield bearer walking in front of him. He kept coming closer,<sup>42</sup> and when he got a good look at David, he was filled with scorn for him because he was just a nice, good-looking boy.<sup>43</sup> He said to David, "What's that stick for? Do you think I'm a dog?" And he called down curses from his god on David. "Come on", he challenged David, "and I will give your body to the birds and animals to eat."

David answered, "You are coming against me with sword, spear, and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the Israelite armies, which you have defied. This very day the Lord will put you in my power; I will defeat you and cut off your head. And I will give the bodies of the Philistine soldiers to the birds and animals to eat. Then the whole world will know that Israel has a God, and everyone here will see that the Lord does not need swords or spears to save his people. He is victorious in battle, and he will put all of you in our power."

Goliath started walking toward David again, and David ran quickly toward the Philistine battle line to fight him. He reached into his bag and took out a stone, which he slung at Goliath. It hit him on the forehead and broke his skull, and Goliath fell face downward on the ground. And so, without a sword, David defeated and killed Goliath with a sling and a stone! He ran to him, stood over him, took Goliath's sword out of its sheath, and cut off his head and killed him. When the Philistines saw that their hero was dead, they ran away.

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Finally, build up your strength in union with the Lord and by means of his mighty power. Put on all the armour that God gives you, so that you will be able to stand up against the Devil's evil tricks. For we are not fighting against human beings but against the wicked spiritual forces in the heavenly world, the rulers, authorities, and cosmic powers of this dark age. So put on God's armour now! Then when the evil day comes, you will be able to resist the enemy's attacks; and after fighting to the end, you will still hold your ground. So stand ready, with truth as a belt tight around your waist, with righteousness as your breastplate, and as your shoes the readiness to announce the Good News of peace. At all times carry faith as a shield; for with it you will be able to put out all the burning arrows shot by the Evil One. And accept salvation as a helmet, and the word of God as the sword which the Spirit gives you. Do all this in prayer, asking for God's help. Pray on every occasion, as the Spirit leads. For this reason keep alert and never give up; pray always for all God's people. And pray also for me, that God will give me a message when I am ready to speak, so that I may speak boldly and make known the gospel's secret. For the sake of this gospel I am an ambassador, though now I am in prison. Pray that I may be bold in speaking about the gospel as I should.

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**LET US PRAY:**

Our God, we know you, through Jesus, as a God of mercy and grace: one who is always ready with a welcome for those whom others reject; with forgiveness for the person who knows that he or she has done wrong and is ready to change.

And so we come to you confidently, as children to a loving father or mother, but may we never forget that you are also a God of power and might; a warrior engaged in combat not with human beings; not with governments or nations - even the ones that we consider most fearful - but with forces and powers that we cannot see... forces whose impact we can sense both in ourselves and in the world around us; forces of destruction, pulling in the opposite direction to your Word of life and freedom and love.

Living God, there is no neutral position in this war. You call us to stand with you on the side of goodness and truth, whatever that may cost us. But you also give us the protection and the weapons that we need.

Forgive us, O God, for not taking full advantage of these; for trying to fight spiritual battles with weapons that are wholly inadequate for the task. We have tried to defend ourselves with meetings and fundraising campaigns, instead of putting on the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith. We have been fearful to pick up the sword of your word, because we know that before it can be effective in any other battles, it must first pierce all our pretending and self-deception. We have seen the harm it can do when people wield your word as a weapon against others, without allowing it to change and transform them.

Lord, we ask for courage in our daily living, with all the opportunities that brings for service and spiritual warfare. Whenever there is a choice between right and wrong; or between good enough and best; when there is opportunity to be selfish or generous; to be cruel or kind... may we choose the better way. And when we are unsure which way to go, may we rely on your Spirit to guide us.

Hear these our prayers, and hear us as we pray together now in the words that Jesus taught:

Our Father, who art in heaven,  
Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come.  
Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread  
And forgive us our trespasses (*debts*)  
as we forgive those who trespass against us. (*our debtors*)  
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,  
For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever. AMEN

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**HYMN 515:** Soldiers of Christ, arise

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**Sermon:** *Harry Potter and the Power of Myth*

It is 14 years - amazingly - since the first Harry Potter book was published in the UK. 'Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets' was an instant success, so much so that by the time the seventh and final book was published, 10 years later, in 2007, it sold 11 million copies within 24 hours of its release. the books have been translated into 67 languages, and have made their author, J K Rowling, a multi-millionaire.

They also, from the start, attracted predictable criticism from predictable quarters - mainly conservative Christians, who were worried that these books might encourage children to dabble in magic and witchcraft.

Watching the final film last week - 'Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, part 2' - I was reminded how profoundly wrong I believe these critics are to be worried by a story that has so much in

common with the central narrative of the Christian faith, and with stories from all the major world faiths and traditions.

I don't know how conscious J K Rowling was of exploring Christian themes - I suspect she was well aware of what she was doing -but they are there in abundance.

There is the basic, universal struggle between Good and evil. The forces of goodness appear to be weaker, and are hampered by the fact that they cannot be as ruthless as the enemy without becoming like him. The struggle is long and costly, but goodness wins out in the end.

One of the things I like about the Harry Potter is the recognition that the potential for good and evil is there within us all. This is not a simplistic 'cowboys and Indians' story, where you can tell the goodies by their white hats and the baddies by their black ones. There is a breath-stopping moment of hesitation in the first story when the Sorting Hat tries to decide whether Harry should go into Slytherin House, with Lucius Malfoy and all the horrible characters, or into Griffindor with Hermione and Ron. It could have gone either way, because Harry had within himself all the strengths and weaknesses of both Houses. At the end of the very last film, Harry's son is about to start at Hogwarts, and his biggest worry is that he may be sent to Slytherin House.

Harry, it turns out, is deeply connected to Voldemort - he who cannot be named - his mortal enemy. The two of them are more alike than either of them wants to admit, and had either of them made different choices, their roles could easily have been reversed.

The stories also bring out the universal nature of the struggle in which we are engaged as human beings, and that is a useful reminder in our own society, where all the emphasis seems to be on the individual. What matters most is our individual happiness and fulfilment; and when someone breaks the rules and offends against society, they are demonised as a monster, and all the blame is put on them as individuals, as though they were wholly different and apart from ourselves, good, respectable members of society.

For Paul, and for tellers of wisdom stories down the ages, there is something much bigger going on. "We are not fighting against human beings but against the wicked spiritual forces in the heavenly world, the rulers, authorities, and cosmic powers of this dark age." And for spiritual battles we need spiritual weapons and spiritual armour.

One piece of armour that is, strangely, missing from Paul's list in Galatians, but which is entirely consistent with the gospel, is the protective power of love.

Harry never met his mother, because she died protecting him from Voldemort's attack when he was just a baby. That's how he got the scar on his forehead, which throbs whenever his enemy is near. His mother's love gives him a protective enchantment that sees his through his childhood years. That is entirely consistent with modern psychology, and with the experience of teachers and social workers across the land: a child who is securely loved in his or her early years has the best possible protection in life.

The stories also highlight the power of friendship, which often gets forgotten in our highly sexualised age. In the church, we're always going on about family values, sometimes to the detriment

of friendship about which Jesus had much more to say than he did about marriage and family life. When he did speak about husbands and wives, parents and children, it was usually in the context of saying that family had to be left behind for the sake of the Kingdom. And the people closest to him, the ones with whom he shared his innermost thoughts and from whom he drew the greatest support, were not his family but his friends.

"Greater love has no-one than this - to give his life for his friends. And you are my friends if you do what I command you." And what was this commandment? What else but to 'love one another.'

There are elements in the Harry Potter stories that mirror the temptations of Jesus:

- ◆ the Mirror of Erised ('desire' spelt backwards) shows the person who looks in it their deepest longings. For Harry, that means seeing himself with his parents, whom he never knew. And the temptation for him would be to stay there, caught in the past, held by what might have been, instead of getting on with life as it is, in the present.
- ◆ the Philosopher's Stone grants eternal life to its holder, but at high cost. Harry is only able to hold it because he does not want to use its powers for himself.
- ◆ There is the Resurrection Stone, which can bring your loved ones back to life after they have died. Rowling uses this device to explore - and help children explore - issues of death and bereavement. Her answer is that the dead are with us always - in our hearts - and so there is no need for magic to interfere with the course of nature
- ◆ And then, in the last book/film, there is the Elder Wand, the most powerful wand in all Wizardry. Harry could have this for his own if he chose - he has earned the right to use it - but we

see him break it in half, and hurl it over a cliff because he knows how dangerous it would be for one person to have so much power.

Finally, most profoundly of all, in the final stages of the last story (put your fingers in your ears if you haven't seen the last film and don't want to know how it ends) comes the moment when Harry realises that the only way for the world to be free of Voldemort's power once and for all, is for Harry himself to die. He goes into battle knowing what must happen; not wanting it, but accepting it willingly. The parallels with Jesus are unmistakable. And remarkably, against all expectation, his death is not the end.

"Goodness *is* stronger than evil;  
love is stronger than hate;  
light is stronger than darkness;  
life is stronger than death."

At one point, in a dream sequence, where Harry meets his old headmaster Dumbledore, he asks, "Is this really happening? Is it all in my head?" And Dumbledore replies, "Of course it's in your head. That doesn't mean it isn't real."

The word 'myth' is often used - both in Christian circles and by critics of faith - as a derogatory term; as though it casts doubt on the validity of the story that is told. But in the most profound stories, it really doesn't matter how much of the story is factually accurate. It may be interesting for archaeologists to go off in search of Mount Ararat and speculate whether pieces of wood may have belonged to Noah's Ark, but it is entirely missing the point of the Flood story; just as all the fuss over supposed clashes between Genesis and scientific theories about the origins of the universe is to fail to understand the kind of stories that they are.

The Harry Potter stories are entirely made up; the stories of King David are so ancient that it is very difficult to tell how much is historical; the story of Jesus has a strong historical core, but we can't be sure about specific details, and the elements are shaped by each of the gospel writers to fit their theological purpose. And none of that matters, because the truth that the stories carry is far deeper and more powerful than mere historicity.

These stories are vehicles for us to explore the great mysteries of life and death - to help explain them to our children - and to help us find strength to engage in the battles that that really matter, trusting in the ultimate victory of goodness and love.

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**HYMN 535:** Who would true valour see

.....  
**Offering**

**Choir Voluntary:** I am weak but thou art strong (MP 263)

I am weak, but thou art strong,  
Jesus, keep me from all wrong;  
I'll be satisfied as long as I walk  
let me walk close with Thee.

*Just a closer walk with thee,  
grant it, Jesus, this my plea;  
daily walking close with thee,  
let it be, dear Lord, let it be.*

Through this world of toils and snares,  
if I falter, Lord, who cares?  
Who with me my burden shares?  
None but thee, dear Lord, none but thee.

.....

## **LET US PRAY:**

God, we thank you for the stories that have been passed down through the generations - told and sung by ancient bards around a fire; read by grandparents to their grandchildren; written and read and assimilated when we were young to help us explore the deep mysteries of life and death; to help us establish our values; to discern the best way to live and find courage to hold firm when everything seems to be against us.

We give thanks for the stories of our faith, recorded in the Bible; lived out in the lives of people we have known, and whom we remember today with gratitude and pride.

We give thanks for spiritual battles in which we ourselves have been engaged, and whose scars we may still bear, but which we have survived, and we pray for those currently engaged in battles of their own:

- ◆ those wrestling with temptation; drawn to something that they know will do them and other people harm, but which they feel powerless to resist
- ◆ those battling with hopelessness and despair, that they may be held safe by the love and support of friends until hope returns again
- ◆ for those struggling through the long, slow journey of grief, that they, too, may find the comfort and support that they need.

We pray for children growing up in a largely secular world, without the solid base of Christian teaching that most of us knew. We are grateful for stories, and films, that help them to know right from wrong, good from evil.

We pray for those engaged in a struggle that may literally cost them their lives, and who take this on willingly for the sake of others:

- ◆ soldiers, sent as peace-keepers and peace-makers into situations of mortal danger;
- ◆ voluntary workers going to help victims of famine and natural disaster.

And for ourselves also we pray, that we may stand firmly with you on the side of justice and truth, and may share in the victory that Christ has won on behalf of us all. We ask these things in Jesus' name and for his sake. AMEN

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**HYMN 476:** Mine eyes have seen the glory

.....  
**Benediction:** Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power  
Go now with confidence into the future,  
knowing that God is with you,  
and may the blessing of God Almighty,  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit, rest upon you  
and remain with you all, this day and for ever more

**Sung Amen**

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