

Frodo's Forgiveness

BY RALPH C. WOOD

The heart of God's love—and thus the real impetus for human love—is forgiveness. Nowhere is THE LORD OF THE RINGS more manifestly Christian than in having pity—mercy and forgiveness—as its central virtue.

At the end of J. R. R. Tolkien's epic trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*, as King Aragorn is preparing to die, he utters his final words to Arwen, his elven queen—words that contain a hint of resurrection: "In sorrow we must go, but not in despair. Behold! we are not bound forever to the circles of the world, and beyond them is more than memory. Farewell!"¹ The account of Arwen's own burial contains another hint of resurrection: "She laid herself to rest upon Cerin Amroth: and there is her green grave, until the world is changed" (3.344). Here, as elsewhere in the trilogy, Tolkien obliquely suggests a hope for radically renewed life beyond "the circles of the world."

Christian hope concerns precisely a radical change that breaks the cycle of the world's endless turning. It takes the natural human aspiration to happiness and reorders it to the kingdom of heaven. Such hope is not a general optimism about the nature of things, nor a forward-looking confidence that all will eventually be well. Instead, it is hope in a future that God alone can and will provide.

ONE GREAT STORY

Such a distinctively Christian hope is not an explicit part of *The Lord of the Rings*, yet all members of the Fellowship of the Ring stake their lives on a future realization of the Good beyond the bounds of the world. Their devotion to their quest does not depend on any sort of certainty concerning its success. They are called to be faithful rather than victorious. Often the fellowship finds its profoundest hope when the prospects seem bleakest.

Near the end of their wearying journey, Frodo and Sam are alone, deep within Mordor, crawling like insects across a vast wilderness. All

their efforts seem finally to have failed. Even if somehow they succeed in destroying the Ring, there is no likelihood that they will survive, or that anyone will ever hear of their valiant deed. They seem doomed to oblivion. Yet amidst such apparent hopelessness, Sam—the peasant hobbit who, despite his humble origins, has gradually emerged as a figure of great moral and spiritual insight—beholds a single star shimmering above the dark clouds of Mordor:

The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach.... Now, for a moment, his own fate, and even his master's, ceased to trouble him. He crawled back into the brambles and laid himself by Frodo's side, and putting away all fear he cast himself into a deep and untroubled sleep (3.199).

This meditation is noteworthy on several counts. Fearing Gollum's treachery, Sam has never before allowed himself to sleep while Frodo also slept. That he should do so now is a sign of transcendent hope—the conviction, namely, that their ultimate well-being lies beyond any foiling of it by Gollum's deceit or Sauron's sorcery. For Sam not to be vexed by Frodo's fate is to have found hope in a future that will last, no matter the outcome of their errand.

More remarkable still is Sam's discernment of the relative power of good and evil, light and darkness, life and death, hope and despair. The vast darkened sky of Mordor, illumined by only a single star, would seem to signal the triumph of evil once and for all. Yet Sam is not bound by the logic of the obvious. He sees that star and shadow are not locked in a dualistic combat of equals, nor are they engaged in a battle whose outcome remains uncertain. He discerns the deep and paradoxical truth that the dark has no meaning apart from the light. Light is both the primal and the final reality, not the night that seeks to quench it. "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5).

Sam's insight, excellent though it is, cannot be sustained apart from a fellowship such as the nine friends have formed and a quest such as they have been charged to fulfill. It also requires a sustaining story—one that is rooted in their history and that sums up and embodies not only their own struggle against Sauron but also the struggle of all the Free Peoples of Middle-earth against similar evils.

There are many competing stories that vie for our loyalty, and Sam tries to distinguish them, to locate the one hope-giving story:

"We shouldn't be here at all [Sam says to Frodo], if we'd known more about it before we started. But I suppose it's often that way.

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 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.

The tales that do not matter concern escapades undertaken because we are bored and seek excitement and entertainment. The tales that rivet the mind, on the other hand, involve a quest that we do not choose for ourselves.

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 tale we've fallen into?" (2.320-321).

Sam has discerned the crucial divide. On the one hand, the tales that do not matter concern there-and-back-again adventures—escapades undertaken because we are bored and seek excitement and entertainment. The tales that rivet the mind, on the other hand, involve a quest that we do not choose for ourselves. Instead, we find ourselves embarked upon a journey or mission quite apart from our choosing of it. What counts, says Sam, is not whether the quest succeeds but whether we turn back or slog ahead. One reason for not giving up, not quitting, is that the great tales are told about those who refused to surrender—those who ventured forward in hope. Real heroism, Sam implies, requires us to struggle hopefully, yet without the assurance of victory.

Frodo interjects that it's best not to know whether we are acting out a happy tale or a sad one. If we were assured of a happy destiny, then we would become presumptuous and complacent; if a sad one, then cynical and despairing. In neither case would we live and struggle by means of real hope.

"Don't the great tales ever end?" Sam asks. Frodo says no. Each individual story—even the story of other fellowships and companies—is sure

to end. But when our own story is done, Frodo adds, someone else will take the one great tale forward to either a better or worse moment in its ongoing drama. What matters, Sam concludes, is that we enact our proper role in an infinitely larger story than our own little narrative: "Things done and over and made into part of the great tales are different. Why, even Gollum might be good in a tale" (2.322).

Sam has plumbed the depths of real hope. The "great tales" stand apart from mere adventures because they belong to the One Great Story. It is a story not only of those who fight heroically against evil, but also of those who are unwilling to exterminate such an enemy as Gollum. As Sam discerns, this tale has a surprising place even for evil. For it's not only the story of the destruction of the ruling ring, but also a narrative of redemption.

PITY AND MERCY

To complete such a quest requires the highest of all virtues: not only hope but also the faith that works through love. Love alone will last unendingly because it unites us both with God and everyone else. Indeed, it defines who God is and who we are meant to be. Love as a theological virtue is not a natural human capacity, not a product of human willing and striving even at their highest. Because charity constitutes the triune God's own essence, it is always a gift and thus also a command. About this matter as about so much else, Christians and Jews are fundamentally agreed.

In both testaments, the heart of God's love—and thus the real impetus for human love—is forgiveness. Nowhere is *The Lord of the Rings* more manifestly Christian than in having pity—mercy and forgiveness—as its central virtue. The summons to pity is voiced most clearly by Gandalf after Frodo expresses his outrage that Bilbo did not kill the wicked Gollum when he had the chance. Frodo has cause for his fury. Gollum was seeking to slay Bilbo, and had Bilbo not put on the Ring to escape him, there is little doubt that Gollum would have succeeded in murdering Frodo's kinsman. Why, asks Frodo, should Bilbo have not given Gollum the justice he so fully deserved?

Gandalf answers with a speech that lies at the moral and religious center of the entire epic:

"What a pity that Bilbo did not stab that vile creature [Frodo declares] when he had a chance!"

"Pity? [Gandalf replies] It was Pity that stayed his hand. Pity, and Mercy: not to strike without need. And he has been well rewarded, Frodo. Be sure that [Bilbo] took so little hurt from the evil, and escaped in the end, because he began his ownership of the Ring so. With Pity."

"I am sorry," said Frodo. "But I am frightened; and I do not feel any pity for Gollum."

"You have not seen him," Gandalf broke in.

"No, and I don't want to," said Frodo. "...Now at any rate he is as bad as an Orc, and just an enemy. He deserves death."

"Deserves it! I daresay he does. Many that live deserve death. And some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them? Then do not be too eager to deal out death in judgement. For even the very wise cannot see all ends. I have not much hope that Gollum can be cured before he dies, but there is a chance of it. And he is bound up with the fate of the Ring. My heart tells me that he has some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end; and when that comes, the pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many—yours not least" (1.68-69).

"The pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many" is the only declaration to be repeated in all three volumes of *The Lord of the Rings*. It is the leitmotiv of Tolkien's epic, its animating theme, its Christian epicenter as well as its circumference. Gandalf's prophecy is true in the literal sense, for the same vile Gollum whom Bilbo had spared long ago finally enables the Ring's destruction.

The wizard's saying is also true in the spiritual sense. Gandalf lays out a decidedly nonpagan notion of mercy. As a creature far more sinning than sinned against, Gollum deserves his misery. He has committed Cain's sin in acquiring the Ring, slaying his cousin and friend. Yet while the Ring extended Gollum's life by five centuries and enabled him endlessly to relish raw fish, it has also made him utterly wretched. Evil is its own worst torment—as Gandalf urges Frodo to notice: "You have not seen him."

Be exceedingly chary, Gandalf warns Frodo, about judging others and sentencing them to death. Though Gandalf speaks here of literal death, there are other kinds of death—scorn, contempt, dismissal—that such judgement could render. Frodo is in danger, Gandalf sees, of committing the subtlest and deadliest of all sins—self-righteousness.

Neither hobbits nor humans, Tolkien suggests, can live by the bread of merit alone. Gollum is not to be executed, though he may well deserve death, precisely because he is a fellow sinner, a fallen creature of feeble frame, a comrade in the stuff of dust. Gandalf admits that there is not much hope for Gollum's return to the creaturely circle, but neither is there much hope for many others, perhaps not even for most. To deny them such hope, Gandalf concludes, is to deny it also to oneself.

Gandalf's discourse on pity also marks the huge distance between Tolkien's book and the heroic world that is its inspiration. Among most ancient and pagan cultures—like their modern counterparts—pity is not a virtue. The Greeks, for example, extend pity only to the pathetic, the helpless, those who are able to do little or nothing for themselves. When Aristotle says that the function of tragic drama is to arouse fear and pity,

he refers to the fate of a character such as Oedipus. We are to fear that Oedipus's fate might somehow be ours, and we are to pity him for the ineluctable circumstances of his life, his unjust fate. But pity is never to be given to the unjust or the undeserving, for such mercy would deny them the justice that they surely merit. Mercy of this kind—the kind that is so central to biblical faith—would indeed be a vice.

According to the warrior ethic of the ancient North, the offering of pardon to enemies is unthinkable: they must be utterly defeated. For Tolkien the Christian, by contrast, love understood as mercy and pity is essential: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.... For if you love those who love you, what reward have you?" (Matthew 5:43-44, 46).

Here we see the crucial distinction between *philia* as the love of friends who share our deepest concerns and *agape* as the love of those who are not only radically "other" to us, but who deserve our scorn and cannot reciprocate our pardon. We can make friends only with those whose convictions we share, but we are called to have pity for those whom we do not trust, even our enemies.

It is precisely such pity that Gandalf offers to Saruman after the battle of Helms Deep. Saruman rejects it in the most vehement and scornful terms. Having learned Gandalf's central teaching, Frodo offers pardon to Saruman one last time—after the Ring has been destroyed and the hobbits are scouring the Shire of the evils that have been visited on it by Saruman and his thugs. Once Saruman is captured, there is a clamor that he be killed. Saruman courts his own execution by mocking his captors. Frodo will have none of it: "I will not have him slain. It is useless to meet revenge with revenge: it will heal nothing" (3.298).

Instead of receiving such mercy, Saruman seeks to stab Frodo. Sam is ready to give Saruman the final sword thrust, but Frodo again denies the malefactor the justice that he is due. He will not deal out judgment in death, knowing that, if Saruman dies in such rage, his life as a wizard will have indeed come to nothing—and perhaps worse than nothing:

"No, Sam!" said Frodo. "Do not kill him even now. For he has not hurt me. And in any case I do not wish him to be slain in this evil

Here we see the crucial distinction between "philia" and "agape." We can make friends only with those whose convictions we share, but we are called to have pity for those whom we do not trust, even our enemies.

mood. He was great once, of a noble kind that we should not dare to raise our hands against. He is fallen, and his cure is beyond us; but I would still spare him, in the hope that he may find it" (3.299).

Then follows one of the most revealing scenes in the entire epic. Instead of receiving this second grant of pity, Saruman is rendered furious by it. He knows that, in showing him pity, Frodo has removed the wizard's very reason for being. Frodo's pardon robs Saruman of his delicious self-pity, his self-justifying resentment, his self-sustaining fury. Having come to batten on his wrath, Saruman flings Frodo's pity back at him in a sputter of acrimony: "You have grown, Halfling," he said. "Yes, you have grown very much. You are wise, and cruel. You have robbed my revenge of sweetness, and now I must go hence in bitterness, in debt to your mercy. I hate it and you!" (3.299)

While revenge curdles the soul and paralyzes the will, pity frees those who will receive it. Repentance does not produce forgiveness, Tolkien shows, but rather the other way around: mercy enables contrition. This is made especially evident when Aragorn orders the assault on the Black Gate of Mordor. He knows that many of his troops are incapable of facing the Sauronic evil: "So desolate were those places and so deep the horror that lay on them that some of the host [the army of the Free Peoples] were unmanned, and they could neither walk nor ride further north" (3.162). Rather than scorning their fear at having to fight "like men in a hideous dream made true," Aragorn has pity on them. He urges them to turn back with honor and dignity, not running but walking, seeking to find some other task that might aid the war against Sauron. Aragorn's mercy has a stunning effect. In some of the warriors, it overcomes their fear and enables them to rejoin the fray. Others take hope from Aragorn's pardon, encouraged to hear that there is "a manful deed within their measure." And so they depart in peace rather than shame. This is the pity that Saruman bitterly rejected, for it would have called him out of his cowardly hatred and sweet revenge into a life of service and virtue.

Perhaps the most poignant scene of pardon in *The Lord of the Rings* occurs with the death of Boromir. He would seem to be the Judas of the story, for it is he who breaks the fellowship by trying to seize the Ring from Frodo. Frodo in turn is forced to wear it in order to escape—not the orcs or the Ringwraiths or even Saruman, but Boromir his friend and fellow member of the company. But no sooner has Boromir seen the horror that he has committed than he recognizes and repents of it: "What have I done? Frodo, Frodo!" he called. "Come back! A madness took me, but it has passed" (1.416). It is too late in the literal sense, because Frodo has already fled. But it is not too late for his redemption. Boromir makes good on his solitary confession of sin by fighting orcs until they finally overcome him.

When Aragorn hears the horn of the desperate Boromir, they run to him, only to find him dying. Boromir does not boast of his valor in death, nor does Aragorn accuse him of evil. Perhaps because he can discern Aragorn's forgiving spirit, Boromir admits his sin, as if the future king were also a priest hearing his last confession: "I tried to take the Ring from Frodo," he said. "I am sorry. I have paid" (2.16).

Boromir does not mean that he has recompensed for his dreadful attempt to seize the Ring. He means that he has paid the terrible price of breaking trust with Frodo. In almost his last breath, therefore, Boromir confesses that he has failed.

Aragorn will not let Boromir die in the conviction that his whole life has been ruined by a momentary act of madness—even though it was prompted by Boromir's arrogant confidence in his own courage. Rather than pointing to his terrible guilt in betraying Frodo and the fellowship, Aragorn absolves the hero by emphasizing the real penance Boromir has performed in fighting evil to the end, even when no one was present to witness his deed: "'No!' said Aragorn, taking his hand and kissing his brow. 'You have conquered. Few have gained such a victory. Be at peace!'" (2.16)

Tolkien captures the transcendent, even divine quality of real love by having it issue in a pity and pardon utterly unknown either to the warrior cultures of the ancient world or to our own equally merciless culture of consumption and competition. "The pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many" is not, therefore, a motto meant only for Middle-earth. It is the key to our own transformation as well.²

NOTES

1 J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, revised edition (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1965, 1967), Volume 3, page 344 (further page citations will be in the text).

2 This article is adapted from *The Gospel According to Tolkien: Visions of the Kingdom in Middle-earth* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 117-155. Used with permission from the publisher. Do not copy without written permission from Westminster John Knox Press.



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