

A PIT FOR THE HEFFALUMP

Our next story ties in with a verse from the book of Proverbs - an idea which is re-iterated in several places in the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament. In Proverbs 28.10 we read

He who tempts the upright into evil ways will land himself in the pit he has dug.

The story in Winnie the Pooh is of course how Piglet meets a Heffalump. Let me remind you of the outline of the story: Christopher Robin tells Pooh and Piglet that he has seen a Heffalump - rather to Pooh's surprise, who says you don't usually see them at this time of year. Pooh makes the solemn decision that he is going to catch a Heffalump - by means of a Cunning Trap - by which he means a Very Deep Pit. There is naturally a great deal of discussion about where this pit should be dug. About a foot further on from where the Heffalump is standing seems like a good idea to Piglet, but Pooh quite reasonably suspects that the Heffalump might get suspicious, and could not be guaranteed to be distracted by looking at the sky at the time. So Pooh has the bright idea of baiting the trap. For Pooh, of course, there can be only one possible bait - honey!

So off he goes, and lifts down a jar to use in the Heffalump trap. It is labelled Hunny, and looks like Honey, but Pooh remembers that his uncle had told him he once had seen cheese of exactly that colour. Now since he, Pooh, doesn't like cheese, there is a chance that Heffalumps don't like cheese. So he needs to eat some to test whether in fact it really *is* honey. And so it proves to be. But Pooh is suspicious:

Unless of course somebody put cheese in at the bottom, just as a joke. Perhaps I had better go a *little* further...just in case...Ah - he gave a deep sigh. I *was* right. It *is* honey, all the way down.

Now already I have lots of theological bells ringing. Pooh is extrapolating from himself in order to decide what is true about the mysterious and unseen Heffalump. The proper name for this activity when we do it with God is anthropomorphism. We talk about God in human terms, because there are no more accurate ones available, but then we go one step too far, and presume that God is exactly like human beings. So we decide that what is good for us must be good for God. We project onto God all our human instincts and preferences, just as Pooh made Heffalumps attracted by honey. He had no objective evidence for that whatsoever. In world religions you can see that process happening time after time. You think of the Norse pantheon: the Norse Gods were a projection of the warlike Vikings. Their heaven - Valhalla - was a projection of an idealised world, in which they could make merry war by day, and sleep easily at night. In order to escape from this natural enough tendency we need to have some objective information about what God really *is* like. There is a wonderful example of this in Hosea Chapter 11. He rages in the name of God about how Israel has been unfaithful to God, betraying his trust. So they will be destroyed, devoured, handed over to foreign kings, and ignored by God. But then he has a change of heart and writes

Tenderness kindles within me. I am not going to let loose my fury, I shall not turn and destroy Ephraim, *for I am God, not a mortal*; I am the Holy One in your midst.

The great act of God in sending Jesus was precisely to make it clear what he was like. And Jesus stood out against the mass of humanity, and showed a different way of being. Man was made in God's image, but had distorted that image through the Fall. Now we could see again the true image of God. But the risk of projecting onto God remains, as the projection of the likes of bears was projected onto the Heffalump.

This same part of the story alerts me too to the risk we all run of trying to delude ourselves. Pooh *says* that he is testing the jar to check it is really the right stuff. But in fact he is indulging his own considerable greed, which is part of his nature. And he finds a reason for extending that need to test - although it is fairly obvious that there is no real need to do so. The result is that he destroys what he wanted for its real purpose, and makes it useless. It is horribly true to the nature of human sinfulness. It was St Augustine who prayed 'Lord make me chaste, but not yet.' He also said

'Yes, Lord, yes, I'll get to it right away; just don't bother me for a little while. But 'right away' didn't happen right away, and 'a little while' turned out to be a very long while.'

We can find the most imaginative reasons for continuing to do what we want to do, but know to be wrong, and for not doing what we don't want to do, and know to be right. That has been true for the greatest of saints, beginning with Paul

The good which I want to do, I fail to do, but what I do is the wrong which is against my will

We are unlikely to be very different from either Paul or Pooh in this respect.

But again, back to our story. Pooh takes the empty jar and Piglet puts it in the pit which he has been busy digging. Pooh goes off home, and goes to bed. He wakes feeling hungry, and goes off to open a jar of honey, but find there isn't one on the shelf. It is only after singing a song about knowing that he was sure he had some that he remembers about the Heffalump trap, and thinks of 587 Heffalumps all making straight for the honey and eating it. Off he goes, down into the pit he has had dug himself, and then remembers that he had already eaten it. But there *might* be a bit left in the bottom, so he sticks his head in it, and the inevitable happens - his head gets stuck. And at first light, when Piglet arrives, he is running about at the bottom of the pit, making a 'loud roaring sound of sadness and despair'. Piglet is terrified

Help Help, a Heffalump, a Horrible Heffalump! Help Help, a Horrible Hoffalump!. Hoff Hoff! A Hellible Horralump! Holl, Holl, a Hoffable Hellerump!

And he goes off to get Christopher Robin, who sees what has happened. And finally Pooh manages to break the jar, and emerges from it. Piglet is ashamed of himself and runs off home.

The pit has been dug, and they who dugged it - Pooh and Piglet - have in a sense both fallen into it themselves. They are their own victims. There is a great deal of theology here about the Fall - we are our own victims because of our sinfulness. The biblical use of the word Pit to denote Hell is splendidly appropriate.

But there is another layer here to be thought about on Good Friday. Weird and wonderful theories about what God was doing in allowing Jesus to become man and to be crucified have been dreamed up over the centuries. There are few more bizarre than the theory of the baited trap. This has its origins in Origen and Ignatius, but is first declared in its full-blown form by Bishop Gregory of Nyssa at the end of the 4th century. Let me read you part of what he wrote:

The purpose of the Incarnation..was that the divine virtue of the Son of God might be as it were a hook hidden beneath the form of human flesh ; that the Son might offer his flesh as a bait, and that then the divinity which lay beneath might catch hold of the prince of this age and hold him fast with its hook So, he that had the powers of death seized the body of Jesus in death, unaware of the hook of divinity concealed therein. Having swallowed it, he was caught straightway; the bars of hell burst, and he was, as it were, drawn up from the pit, to become food for others.

It is hard to know how good, intelligent and pious people could take this gibberish seriously - but they did for several centuries - including St Augustine, who retold it using the imagery of a mousetrap. It has been fun to think of the story of Pooh baiting his Heffalump trap, but we are in an equally unreal world if we allow ourselves to think of God baiting a trap with Jesus' divinity concealed inside his humanity. Yet what those thinkers were doing was attempting to put into words something of the defeat of evil that happened in the crucifixion and resurrection. The world was not the same place, because sin, death and evil had been faced and conquered. The pit, which men had dug for themselves was no longer to be feared. They could say with the Psalmist

I waited patiently for the Lord, and he inclined to me and heard my cry.
He brought me up from the pit of roaring waters, out of the mire and clay
and set my feet upon a rock and made firm my foothold.
And he has put a new song in my mouth, even a song of thanksgiving to our God.