

AN ENCHANTED PLACE

It is a very curious thing about children's literature, that the author often gets embroiled in something far deeper than might seem appropriate for children. It is almost as if the child is in touch with a seriousness of life which adults cover up. It is the outworking of Thomas Traherne's view of childhood accessibility to God.

I was a stranger, which at my entrance into the world was saluted and surrounded with innumerable joys; my knowledge was divine.

Children are open to God in a special way - I think that is true. Some of you will know that extraordinary passage in *Wind in the Willows* when Mole and Ratty meet with Pan (although he is not named as such)

Suddenly the Mole felt a great Awe fall upon him, an awe that turned his muscles to water, bowed his head and rooted his feet to the ground. It was not manic terror - indeed he felt wonderfully at peace and happy - but it was an awe that smote and held him, and, without seeing, he knew it could only mean that some august Presence was very very near

It goes on to describe what they saw - a mystic experience of an intense kind. And they whisper a conversation

'Rat' he found breath to whisper, shaking. 'Are you afraid?'

'Afraid?' murmured the Rat, his eyes shining with unutterable love. 'Afraid! Of him? O never, never! And yet - and yet - O Mole, I am afraid!'

Then the two animals, crouching to the earth, bowed their heads, and did worship.

I have chosen as my last visit to the Winnie-the-Pooh books the very last chapter of *The House at Pooh Corner*, which is barely a story at all. But in much the same way as Kenneth Grahame felt able to put that mystic moment in *Wind in the Willows* without any concern that he would lose the attention of his young readers, so A.A.Milne seems equally at home bringing his book to a close in a way which is mystical in another sense, and which at one level might seem equally inappropriate.. My guess is that the child hears a different story - but underneath it is a stream of adult thinking which is important for them to grow into.

Let me explain. In this Chapter, there is a rumour that Christopher Robin is going to leave the animals. This worries them in a sense, but they are not heart-broken. They organise a meeting. Rabbit with some difficulty writes a notice which says

Notice a meeting of everybody will meet at the House at Pooh Corner to pass a Resolution By Order
Keep to the Left signed Rabbit.

Eeyore writes a long poem and it is duly presented to Christopher Robin. They can't quite bring themselves to ask him if he really is going. But he is pleased by the gift, and they slope off, leaving him alone with Pooh. He asks Pooh to come with him, rather as Jesus takes his closet circle to the Mount of the Transfiguration. They discuss what Pooh likes doing best. Christopher Robin likes doing Nothing best - by which he means what you

are doing when someone asks you what you are doing and you say 'Oh, Nothing'! But Christopher Robin hesitantly says that he is not going to do nothing any more. Pooh asks

Never again?

And Christopher Robin says

Well, not so much. They don't let you.

It is of course all about growing up. The fact is that Christopher Robin is growing out of playing with his stuffed toys. He is going to leave childhood behind. Or at least, he will do so for most of the time. But he cannot leave it behind entirely. So he asks Pooh if he will continue to come to the place they are at - (of which more in a moment) and promise that he will never forget Christopher Robin.

There is so much theology here. It would be easy if this were Ascensiontide to talk about this story in relation to the way the disciples had to cope with letting Jesus go. But there is an element of it in the story leading up to the Passion. Peter protests that he will never leave Jesus - but then finds he has denied him three times in the courtyard, and weeps bitterly. They all want to hold onto the Jesus they knew. But they had to grow up. They had to move away from the dependency which had been appropriate to an independence which relied on Jesus in a new way, and which would enable them to take his message to the wider world. They had to let go of their spiritual childhood, and yet be confident that although Jesus had gone, things would still be all right.

I said that I would return to the place where this happens. Milne calls Galleon's Leap 'The Enchanted Place' - it is a special place in its topology - lots of trees - so many they cannot be accurately counted, despite tying string round them as you try. It is a place which is restful - you don't find the need to keep moving, as you do anywhere else. It is a mystical place.

Sitting there they could see the whole world spread out until it reached the sky, and whatever there was all the world over was with them in Galleon's Leap

Places which transcend time and place are of the essence of religion. That is the concept of eternity, which is not the infinite extension of time, but the absence of time. That is what we have to get in touch with on Good Friday. What happened on a hillside in Jerusalem in the year 33 AD, or whenever is not to be confined to that time and that place. The death of Jesus is for all time and all places. He died and rose not just for them there, but for us here, and for everyone everywhere, and, to use a less common word which I love, everywhen.

It is that timelessness with which Milne closes the book

So they went off together. But wherever they go and whatever happens to them on the way, in that enchanted place on the top of the Forest a little boy and his Bear will always be playing.

And that is how we think of the death of Jesus - it is always happening, as is the resurrection. The world may think it has grown up, and some may think they have grown out of such things. But that simply isn't possible. The cross is an enchanted place, and will never cease to be so.