

THE EXPOTITION TO THE NORTH POLE

One day Christopher Robin tells Pooh that they are going on an Expedition. Pooh doesn't get it quite right, of course, and tells everyone they are going on an Expotition - Christopher Robin tries to correct him - 'It's got an x in it.' And indeed it had. The expotition, or expedition was to discover the North Pole. Now as we all know, there is a magnetic quality about the pole - that is what makes it so important in navigation. The needle points to where magnetic north is, and that helps us to get our bearings (if you will forgive the pun in the context of the works of A.A.Milne) and helps us to see where we are.

In John's gospel Jesus talks about another pole - the Cross, having precisely that kind of magnetic quality:

When I am lifted up from the earth, I shall draw everyone to myself.

So looking at this story of the Expotition seems to be a very likely source of good theology for Good Friday. It comes from a reality which is as real as the magnetism of the North Pole, and has been observable from the very beginning of Christian history. The Cross does exercise a quite mysterious fascination, even for those who are outside the Christian faith. If we go right back to the very beginnings, it was the crunch point for both Jews and Gentiles in the first generation of preachers. Paul, writing to the Corinthians says that he preaches not signs, which the Jews want, or wisdom, which is what the Greeks want, but Christ crucified. And the reaction?

this is an offence to Jews and folly to Gentiles

They may not find it to their taste, they may not understand it, but they cannot ignore it. The drawing power of the cross which Jesus had talked about was proving to be true.

Back to the story: Christopher Robin has explained what they are going to do, but we also discover that he doesn't really understand it at all. Pooh asks him what the North Pole *is*.

'It's just a thing you discover,' said Christopher Robin carelessly, not being quite sure himself.

There are many people who have started out on a spiritual quest by looking at the Cross, whilst not really being entirely sure what it is they are looking for. The longing for God is so deep within the human psyche, that it may be something people are aware of, without any real focus to define what it should mean. It is the kind of feeling of restlessness St Augustine talks about when he says that 'our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you'.

Pooh is not sure that this kind of quest is up his street - he asks if bears are any good at discovering north poles. He is assured that not only are bears good at it, but so are Kangas and Rabbits, and everyone else who inhabits Pooh's world. There are many people who shrug off the spiritual quest by saying 'I'm not religious'. However, it is surprising - or is it? - that many people who say that actually continue afterwards by saying 'I'm not religious, but...' the universality of a search for meaning, and a search for ideals and universals is stronger than any discomfort with such ideas of religion as they have already encountered. As William Ward wrote

Man is a peculiar, puzzling paradox, groping for God and hoping to hide from him at the selfsame time.

But he is a spiritual being, and no amount of discomfort can finally overcome that. And paradoxes abound - as someone said 'I'm an atheist - thank God!'

So off the Expedition goes. They lose sight, if they ever had one, of what they were actually on about. At one point Pooh tells Piglet that they are 'looking for the Pole - or was it a mole?' But generally a good time is being had by all. They are doing something together. It is purposeful, if a little unfocused in its purposefulness. And as often happens when people get together, their camaraderie results in song - Pooh writes a song about it, which celebrates what they are out to do - not so very far removed from the purposes of some of our hymns. There are many people who enjoy Songs of Praise who are pretty vague about what the hymns are about. The debate about what they are actually on about, what the purpose of their journey is all about continues.

Christopher Robin takes Rabbit aside and asks if *he* knows what the Pole looks like

I did know once, only I've sort of forgotten, said Christopher Robin carelessly.

It's a funny thing, said Rabbit, but I've sort of forgotten too, although I did know *once*.

I suppose it's just a pole stuck in the ground?

Sure to be a pole, said Rabbit, because of calling it a pole, and if it's a pole, well, I should think it would be sticking in the ground, shouldn't you, because there'd be nowhere else to stick it.

There is a necessary wrestling with doubt that most Christians have to go through, in refreshing the mind from time to time, about what the expedition we call the journey of faith is all about, and what it is we are ultimately seeking. Although we did know once, it is possible to lose sight of the original vision - or even simply to have been carried along by a set of words without ever actually demanding of ourselves what they really mean. I remember many years ago working with a group of house-group leaders. They were all fairly confident they knew what Christianity was all about. I put various phrases from the Creed on bits of paper on the floor, and asked them to pick one up at random, and explain it. They all found it much harder than they had anticipated. We get used to the words, and may actually not be very aware of whether or not we have much in the way of meaning behind them.

Our noble Expedition have a certain number of adventures on the way, leading eventually to the crisis of Roo falling into the river. They are all scrabbling about wondering how to rescue him, when Pooh finds a solution

Two pools below Roo, he was standing with a long pole in his paws, and Kanga came up and took one end of it, and between them they held it across the lower part of the pool; and Roo, still bubbling proudly 'Look at me swimming' drifted up against it and climbed out.

Roo is saved. And Christopher Robin makes the momentous realisation Pooh, he said, where did you find that pole?

Pooh just looked at the pole in his hands

I just found it, he said. I thought it might be useful. I just picked it up.

Pooh, said Christopher Robin solemnly, the Expedition is over.

You have found the North Pole.

People sometimes find the cross by accident, in much the same way. They search and search, but God takes them by surprise, when they least expect to find him

The end of the searching for Pooh and the others is not a static pole - a thing to be looked at, but a pole which is life-saving. There is a terrible misrepresentation when we talk about the cross in static terms. It is too dynamic (and that literally means 'full of power') for that. The cross is the means of our rescue, just as it was for Roo who had fallen in the water. It is the means whereby we are brought to safety. The word 'salvation' really means 'rescue'. The theorising about the nature of the pole for Christopher Robin came after he had seen it in action. It wasn't quite what he imagined, but he recognised that it worked. God often takes us by surprise, and we discover that we have met with him only as we look back and reflect. The cross, the pole has been the means of our rescue. We can debate its nature after we have been thankful for what it has done.