

The mystery of The Lost World

It happens quite often these days. I find myself immersed in a biblical text. I am consulting recognised scholars to see what their thoughts are and I find myself, almost a little like Alice, down the rabbit hole. I am absolutely engrossed and often mesmerised by the text opening up before me and ironically, for all my excitement, there are very few, if any people, that I can easily share these discoveries with. Most of the friends I could talk to are busy people who might well be supportive, but they have things to do and would find the intensity of such introspection intrusive. It is a little like there being two worlds; one above the rabbit hole where real people live in a real world, and this second world at the bottom of the rabbit hole where ancient metaphor gave birth to wonderful and creative images of God. What is more, these images turned out to be a view of reality, hidden from the world by a veil of unknowing.

These assertions of loneliness are not entirely true, because in one sense I can participate in academic forums where these issues are being discussed, but in another sense, forums also bring a kind of distancing. A kind of separation. You see, it is one thing to touch the fire that engulfed the biblical people so long ago, it quite another thing to be scratching around in the ashes of a past fire, in the hope that in this current environment, a new phoenix will be birthed.

The Rabbit Hole

Many years ago, during my teenage wanderings, I engaged in Speleology (Caving). This exercise brought me into contact with one of the wonders of our Waitomo Cave System. I was taken by our group, to a very special place, out from Pio Pio, where I was told about a pool of water, so clear, that you could see a great distance into it's depths. I saw the pool. I was entranced and I just sat looking into the water for what may have been quite some time. Eventually, I realised, as my eyes adjusted to the vision, that actually, there was no water, and that I was looking through a 'porthole' into a cave called the 'Lost World'. Probably thousands of years ago, the roof of this cave collapsed in, opening a large rift in the ground above and taking with it when it collapsed, much vegetation. Light pouring from

above, then nurtured the vegetation and it grew. For the whole of the 100 metres down the walls of the cave, from the opening at ground level, all the way to the floor of the cave, begonias are firmly established and thriving.

Considerable caution needs to be exercised in reading this description, because like Alice in wonderland, things at the bottom of the Rabbit hole are not what they seem.

Very recently in worship, we sang the glorious Veni Emmanuel (O come, O come Emmanuel). It contains the lines;



Standing on a rock, deep inside the lost world, one caver observes another abseiling into the cave.

O come, O come, thou Lord of Might,
Who to thy tribes, on Sinai's height,
In ancient times didst give the law
In cloud and majesty and awe

By chance, this coincided with my reading a paper by a Jewish Professor of Biblical languages, from the University of Jerusalem and his paper dealing with the same passage from Exodus, (the giving of the Commandments.) Like so much of the biblical story, we read it once; we absorb it into our history and we think we have it sussed. Professor Emanuel Tov makes it very clear that there is so much more to see. Just as I was wooed by the Port-Hole into the lost world and then discovered that there was so much more to know, so it is with our biblical journeys. It is a bit like observing the colour of the front door of our home. Observing the door is one thing but opening it and entering the house is quite another story.

I found myself thinking about the old hymn, 'Tell me the Old Old Story' The first verses has the lines;

Tell me the old, old story
Of unseen things above
Of Jesus and his glory,
Of Jesus and his love.
Tell me the story simply,
As to a little child;
For I am weak, and weary,
And helpless, and defiled.

And here is the bind. There is unquestioningly, a great hunger from people who want to hear the story simply; as to a little child. Ultimately, the problem here is that just as I experienced the exhilaration of abseiling into the lost world and thus gained a different view from 'simply' looking through the porthole, so, immersing ourselves in scripture and asking hard questions opens new doors and new vistas which ultimately enhance our faith. We are gifted with new visions that would not be available to us if the rule was one of utter simplicity.

For years, after seeing the porthole into the lost world, I had phantasies about entering the cave and walking in the underground river, or exploring the luxuriant growth. When eventually, (some thirty years later) I did enter the cave, I soon found myself standing underneath (the bottom of the Rabbit hole)the portal that began this huge adventure. It was one thing to look down through the portal, but quite another to stand at the bottom and look up I was awestruck. In paralysing exhilaration I was immersed in the heart of divine mystery. For me personally, this was a life changing experience of other-ness. How did I know to use divine mystery as a descriptor? Actually, I know no other way. I was engulfed in a huge spiritual experience. It felt entirely right to describe it as some form of a theophany.

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