

“Not a Tame Lion”

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The images we encounter of Jesus, whether they be physical icons or works of art that we can see and touch, or metaphors and scenes we come back to in moments of prayer and contemplation, shape our understanding of the personality of the incarnate God. Perhaps you are familiar with a particular painting of Jesus embracing a group of children, a common image reflected in carvings on baptismal fonts and in murals on church nursery walls. Perhaps you carry close to your heart the image of Christ hanging on the cross which the crucifix in your childhood home conveyed, eyes cast heavenward. Maybe your image of Christ has been influenced by popular films and television shows, or by the paintings and sculptures of the great masters. There are as many different ways to describe and envision the person of Jesus as there are Christians, and it is a testament to the power of the Gospel that men and women across the world have been able to depict the face of God and see in it a familiar reflection.

And yet, for all the artwork in the world, I’m not sure I’ve ever seen a depiction of Christ in the scene we read today. I looked it up, and not a single result looked even vaguely familiar, although most of the paintings looked very similar. Scenes of absolute chaos, animals and people scrambling over one another as Jesus stands over them with one hand pulled back as if preparing to strike, the other pointing out as if directing the traffic to the nearest exit. These images of Christ, some stills from modern movies and others paintings in the Renaissance style, all feature heavy furrowed brows and eyes cast downward at the bedlam at his feet. This angry, forceful, violent image of Jesus is not one that we often see, nor is it frequently enshrined in stained glass

or fresco in our places of worship. It might be hard to believe that the same Jesus who is so often in our minds as a quietly resting infant or a welcoming young man or a willing victim is found here in this unfamiliar rage. What are we to make of this Jesus who drives out animals and flips over tables and pours money over the floor to roll out onto the street?

An image from childhood comes to mind, a depiction of Jesus that might make some sense of the Prince of Peace's holy tirade. C. S. Lewis, an Anglican convert whose career as an academic and apologist is often forgotten in favor of his well-loved works of fiction, gave us a new shape in which to encounter Christ. Aslan, the fictional lion who is a central figure in the Chronicles of Narnia, is an explicit Christ figure, powerful and omniscient and regal. In the world of the series, Aslan pre-exists time, wields an innate and undefinable authority, and makes the ultimate sacrifice to save all living things from the wickedness of the enemy. In Aslan we have an imaginative representation of the Lion of Judah, Christ the King.

Aslan is described as King of beasts, the son of a distant Emperor, and not as merely a lion, but as THE lion. At the thought of meeting this King, the young heroine asks "Is he quite safe?" The reply comes "Who said anything about safe? Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He is the king." Elsewhere, we are reminded that Aslan is a wild lion, not a tame one bending to the will of others. Upon meeting him, the various characters of the novel feel fear, courage, awe, anger, and above all an instinctual need to be near him despite all dangers. Those with wickedness in their hearts look on him with fright and with a deep sense of conviction for their sins; some choose to confess while others turn their backs and run swiftly away. The presence of Aslan is described as playful like a kitten, dangerous like a thunderstorm, impossible to ignore and awful to behold. To approach the King Lion is to approach a dangerous righteousness, a zealous mercy. This is our Jesus, the Son of God we meet in the Temple today. Jesus brings us

comfort, yes. Jesus delights in our joys and dwells with us in our sorrows, most definitely. The Lion of Judah is good, yes. But he is not safe.

The dangerous nature of Jesus is rarely preached or written about. Few hymns and poems and paintings attempt to capture the zealous prophet turning over tables and chasing people and animals out of the Temple. We are not even really sure what exactly explains this rage, only that the disciples understood it to be a moment when Jesus is overtaken by zeal for God his father's house. Although it does seem that something about the scene upset Jesus, it might be even more significant to notice what Jesus's actions tell us about him as a person. In this scene, our sentimental murals of Jesus softly smiling are disrupted, and we are forced to see past our two-dimensional images, and look into the depths of Christ's self. Jesus is good, but he is not safe.

This might make you uncomfortable. It surely makes me uneasy. We want and need the safety and security that our faith offers us. Our very human nature cries out for comfort, especially in times of scarcity or fear or isolation. Very often, we find ourselves reduced to fragile little ones, reaching out for the warm embrace of Jesus, and we know that he desires to gather us to himself just as desperately. And yet. Our comfort is not always righteous. Our comfort is not always just. Our safety and our success are not always Godly. It is in these realities that the presence of Jesus becomes dangerous, as the temples of our souls become marketplaces of greed and selfishness and privilege. Jesus is good, but he is not safe. The lion's presence compels the sinful to repentance, summons up the voices of the silent, and makes the craven courageous. The danger is not to ourselves, but to the things which have led us astray. Our pride in our idols, our slothful resistance to change, our greed at the expense of our neighbors, our gluttonous use of resources with no care for those who come after us, our wrathful insistence that life belongs to us and not to God, our envy and lust for those things which are not

for us. The presence of Jesus is a cleansing fire to drive out these things which inhibit our worship of God. Our temples are always in need of purging. In what ways has your life become a marketplace, a noisy den of habits and transactions? In our institutions, what tables need to be overturned? What, if we gave him half a chance, would Jesus drive out? Following Jesus has never been a safe endeavor. After all, he is not a tame lion.