

Shadowlands: will the real C.S. Lewis please stand up?

A review by David Kettle

Following the television programme and the stage play about C.S. Lewis's relationship with Joy Gresham, we now have Richard Attenborough's film. It is a moving account, superbly acted. Beneath the sentiment runs a bold story line of, in the words of a critic, 'the breakdown (for Lewis) of repression and inhibition, and then the terror of losing the person who has forced unconditional love out of him.'

It is a poignant story. For those of us who come to it with a debt of gratitude to Lewis for having enlivened our faith, however—and we are many—the film's story line raises questions. Not about the tale itself as a piece of cinema: on that level it is delightful. The questions that arise are about the truthfulness of this portrayal of Lewis' faith, and of Christian faith in general. The film has quite definite things to say about this.

Experience or denial?

Let us look at the story line. Lewis, we discover, has been accustomed to say much on the topic of grief and pain. "We are made not to be happy, but that we may learn to love and to be loved," he lectures his audiences. "God's hammer-blows are what makes us perfect." Such sentiments are repeated, themselves like hammer-blows, in the course of the film. Are these words of honest wisdom from one who has entered deeply into the experience of pain? The answer this film offers is 'No'. Lewis speaks out of denial of his unresolved grief at the loss of his mother in childhood. The magic of Narnia (and presumably of Christianity's heaven) is fed for him by the same impulse of denial. Lewis deserves well the amusement of his pub friends, and that of Joy, who gently teases his self-deception.

The final conversion (if I can dare to call it that) for Lewis comes when Joy, after their few short years of marriage, dies of cancer. Having brought Lewis home, so to speak—"You have made me happy," he tells her radiantly—she is taken from him. Now, unlike the confident orator we

have known before, Lewis has nothing to say about grief and pain. Now, unlike before, he is truly in touch with his experience—and he can find nothing to say except 'It's a mess!' The closing scene of the film fails to take us beyond this, and, given his plot, surely Attenborough shouldn't have tried.

This film is one of many portrayals of Lewis since his death, varying



Anthony Hopkins plays C.S. Lewis in *Shadowlands*

in tone from uncritical adulation to the psycho-analytic demolition job in David Holbrook's *The Skeleton in the Wardrobe*. How truthful is this particular presentation of Lewis? In particular, how truthful is it concerning Lewis's faith?

Let us ask firstly about Lewis's many words about a loving purpose behind pain. Were these spoken in authentic faith, or were they really driven by denial? The question is a crucial one for those of us who are grateful to Lewis for helping us see God for ourselves. To put it bluntly, either Lewis saw the truth and has helped us to see it too, or he was driven by denial and our response to what he says simply reinforces our own similar denial.

Lewis comes across in his writings as ruthlessly honest with his wayward heart. Is this really honesty, though, or is self-dramatisation the

real point? Could it really be just an attempt to pre-empt others from charging him with self-deception—another part of a stratagem to maintain his illusion of being in control.

In pursuing this we might consider Lewis's words specifically about grief. Take for example the passage in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* when Susan and Lucy crouch all night beside the dead

Aslan. Lewis writes,

I hope no one who reads this book has been quite as miserable as Susan and Lucy were that night; but if you have been—if you've been up all night and cried till you have no more tears left in you—you will know that there comes in the end a sort of quietness. You feel as if nothing was ever going to happen again ...

Are these the words of one open to his own grief or not?

Shadowlands presents Lewis's intellectualising as a denial strategy, a way for him to establish a private world over which he has control, and to keep at bay the real world and his vulnerability within it. Now certainly ideas *can* be used to shut out the real world—to hide from the demand to let go and let be. But did they have no other meaning in Lewis' life? Wasn't

intellectual struggle for Lewis rather than the means of staying *responsibly open* to reality instead of being seduced and paralysed by private fears and fantasies?

Do ideas necessarily stand (as in the common myth) for an attempt at cold control over reality, in opposition to honest feeling? This is an important issue, not least for Christians. What about our attempts to speak of God's purposes in the crucifixion of Jesus, to take the fundamental example? Are these driven by denial? Again of course they *can* be; they can be an attempt to push away the fact that Jesus' death was more shockingly, finally senseless than we dare to admit. But it is equally necessary that we, like the two on the Emmaus Road, be awakened from the dereliction of grief as our hearts catch fire in a rebirth of hope and rediscovery of purpose.

To come alive in this way is not the same as rationalising away unwelcome truth. To assume that it is, is a kind of ideological bigotry. Openness to the real world demands from us new acceptance of loss, indeed—but equally, new beginning in responsible hope. Both are necessary if we are to be true to what really is. What matters



© Spelling Films International

Debra Winger as Joy Gresham

is not that we finally fathom the depths of either of these demands upon us—that would be impossible in this life—but that we live responsive to each as they meet us anew in each situation we encounter. As Austin Farrer wrote, 'The cross defeats our hope; the resurrection terrifies our despair.' We never move beyond the

creative tension found here at the heart of our faith.

One thing is clear. If Lewis's intellectual activity *was* the kind of ex-



© Spelling Films International

Christmas at The Kilns

ercise in denial and illusory control which the film portrays it as being, Joy's death left him *unconverted*. His journal entries at the time (published later as *A Grief Observed*) stand in clear continuity with all that he has written before. He even speaks of the intellect with new warmth, for that matter. That particular entry follows an incident when he had a fleeting impression of Joy's presence with him. Lewis describes this encounter as involving intelligence and attention, but not emotion. He muses on the dead as sheer intellects, living, as he now contemplates them, in a communion not cold, drab and comfortless but—how should he describe it? 'Brisk? Cheerful? Keen? Alert? Wide awake? Above all, solid. Utterly reliable. Firm. There is no nonsense about the dead.'

A Grief Observed shows also that for Lewis there remained a continuing tension between his love for God and his love for Joy, and therefore a tension towards his own grief. Would that tension have been resolved had he simply accepted, and not resisted, his feelings for her? The story line in the film suggests this. Would this not however have been just as false and premature a 'resolution' as the outright denial of those feelings?

To stand by Lewis rather than Attenborough as a guide to truth is not to deny there were ambiguities about Lewis's faith. But it is to believe in the possibility that faith rather

than denial will have the last word, for Lewis and for us. Lewis's Christian conversion was his real conversion. Lewis's love for Joy and his

grief in her death were all part of the journey of faith which he followed from then onwards.

To stand by Lewis rather than Attenborough *is*, however, to reject as blind the latter's assumption that Lewis's faith and Christian faith in general express denial of the real world. Attenborough's view reflects a widespread but false ideological assumption that truth is reliably found by doubting ideas—resisting truth claims—in the name of honesty, openness and tolerance. The one and only enemy of truth now becomes the person committed unquestioningly to a truth claim. There is another and equally formidable enemy of truth, however, and that is *irresponsibility*. Truth—and above all spiritual and moral truth—requires that we take responsibility for it, if it is not to dissolve into subjective feeling and fantasy. We are to be intelligent, trustworthy stewards of the truth. We are to live by it, stand up for it, stake our lives upon it. It is this responsibility which C. S. Lewis teaches us so well.



Rev David Kettle is Manawatu Anglican Tertiary Chaplain, and Minister of Milson

Combined Church, Palmerston North.