

# KNOWING & DOING

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*A Teaching Quarterly for Discipleship of Heart and Mind*

From the Fall 2016 issue of Knowing & Doing:



## Surprised by Belfast: Significant Sites in the Life of C.S. Lewis, Part 3, St. Mark's Church, Holywood Road

by Sandy Smith

*Author of C.S. Lewis and the Island of His Birth*

In this article, I turn to St. Mark's Church in East Belfast, significant in the life of the Lewis family and their more distant relatives, the Ewart and Hamilton families. C.S. Lewis's grandfather, the Rev. Thomas R. Hamilton, was rector from 1878 (when the church was built) until his retirement in 1900. This church records their names at every corner on numerous plaques, the lectern, and the stained glass. It was here that C.S. (or "Jack") Lewis was christened as an infant and confirmed (even if in disbelief) in his teenage years.

### St. Mark's Parish Church

St. Mark's, Dundela, is an imposing sandstone church some five miles from the center of Belfast. It was designed by William Butterfield, a famous Victorian architect closely associated with the Tractarian Movement. St. Mark's dominates the small hill on which it is built, and its tall tower is a landmark visible from many parts of Belfast.

The font in which Lewis and his brother, Warnie, were baptized still occupies its original position beneath St. Mark's tall tower, as specified by Butterfield. Several features in the architecture of St. Mark's are reflected in Jack's writing. First I note the pattern of tiles immediately in front of the font in the tower floor. The pattern forms a series of chevrons that point along the nave of the church in the direction of the sanctuary at the east wall. Butterfield used this motif as a device to highlight the notion of direction, just as he used the tower itself. The tower is topped with a pointed roof and a spire pointing upward, while the chevrons in the floor point horizontally along the length of the church.

The length of the church is 183 feet, the same length as the height of the tower. While the tower and spire point heavenward, the chevrons point to the cross, located on the east wall and elevated above the other significant church furnishings. In using these devices, Butterfield highlighted the notion of a journey. The idealized journey, commencing with an infant's baptism, Butterfield depicted as termi-



nating in one dimension at the cross, a powerful Christian symbol of sacrifice and redemption. The journey could be described using alternative words: life's pilgrimage or voyage.

Both of these ideas are used significantly in two of Lewis's books: *The Pilgrim's Regress* and *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. This terminology—pilgrimage and voyage—repeated in the context of a baptismal service for infants in St. Mark's Church, would have influenced Jack, hearing it at baptisms; the idea would have buried itself deeply in his thinking. This leads to the question of whether there is any evidence in his writing that these ideas—of pilgrimage or a particular destination or goal at the end of life's journey/voyage—were shaped by his presence in this Belfast congregation.

## The Lion

The church rectory, which was the home of Jack's mother, Flora, and his grandparents, was immediately adjacent to the church when it was first built. The old rectory, as it is now called, is still standing much as it was in 1878. Even after his grandfather retired from his post, Jack undoubtedly would have stood at the front door of the rectory looking intently at the doorknob just above the letter box. On any other rectory door, the pattern of the door furniture might be merely an accidental or an incidental detail, but not on here. This is the rectory of St. Mark's. The church icon for St. Mark is the lion, and the church locally was called the Lion on the Hill,<sup>1</sup> a reference to that part of the Holywood Road known as Bunkers Hill. The church magazine is called *The Lion*, and appropriately the brass knob on the rectory door is cast in the form of a lion's head. That is where Jack no doubt encountered the first image of a lion that impressed him—on the front doorknob of his grandfather's rectory and his mother's former home.

In a letter to his publisher in response to a request for some information regarding the origins of the images that bring the Narnian Chronicles to life, Jack indicates that many had been there from his teenage years or earlier, in his childhood. He says in *Surprised by Joy* that "at the age of six, seven and eight—I was living almost entirely in my imagination; or at least that the imaginative experience of those years now seems to me more important than anything else."<sup>2</sup>

Was the lion part of this imagery? Certainly yes; he tells us: "I pored endlessly over an almost complete set of old *Punches* which stood in my father's study. Tenniel gratified my passion for "dressed animals" with his Russian Bear, British Lion, Egyptian Crocodile and the rest."<sup>3</sup>

Did he know about the association of the lion with St. Mark? Evidence indicates yes, because he included the image of a lion, wrapped around the shoulders of St. Mark, in the memorial window he had installed in the church in 1933 in memory of his parents. The image of the lion that so dominates the *Chronicles of Narnia* undoubtedly stems from the church of his childhood, St. Mark's in East Belfast.

## Memorial Window

While winding up their father's affairs in Belfast, Warnie and Jack agreed to commission a stained-glass window in St Mark's to the memory of their parents. The window was installed in 1933.

As the photograph shows, the window is in three panels. The top of each panel features an image of a building. The central portion of each panel is dominated by the portrayal of a male figure, and beneath the feet of the three male figures there are various small details, mostly of small buildings characterized by pastel color gable walls and mono-pitched roofs constructed from red roof tiles. There is no difficulty about the identity of the three male figures. Their names are written in the glass. They are, left to right, St. Luke, St. James, and St. Mark, an unusual trio.

The relative positions of some of the icons in the window are also unusual. At the top of the central panel, there is an image of the church itself. While it seems logical that an image of the church itself should occupy a central and topmost position, if the same logic is applied to the male figures, one might expect the image of St. Mark to be beneath the icon of the church, in the center. Something seems odd with the selection of St. James as the centerpiece. If St. Matthew, for example, had been included in place of St. James, some rationale might have been found in having the images of the writers of the Synoptic Gospels. But the inclusion of St. James leaves the need for some other explanation. There is a yet another puzzle. The Latin inscription at the bottom of the central

panel indicates that the window is in memory of Lewis's father and mother, and it gives their names and dates. This raises the question as to what has been included specifically in the window that serves as a memorial to either of them other than the inscription itself.

Some answers to these puzzles have been suggested. The first is that Lewis's father was Albert *James* Lewis; the St. James image is therefore included to his father's memory. This suggestion may be supported by details of the depiction: St. James is holding a silver chalice in his left hand. The communion silver used in St. Mark's was gifted to the church by the Lewis family; the Lewis silver is used on occasion for communion services. In Lewis's own life, an element of estrangement existed in the common and family communion between him and his father. The symbolism might be that of a restored communion and of a restored Christian communion, given that Lewis himself had by 1933 been restored to the Christian tradition in which he grew up.

It is almost as if in the window Lewis wanted to place his father center stage and holding the symbol of a restored communion. There is also the suggestion that St. James is included as the patron saint of the pilgrim. As if to emphasize this, there is an image of a ship above the left shoulder of St. James. The ship is reminiscent not only of a voyage/journey but also of life's pilgrimage and the patronage of St. James, who is still associated with the European pilgrimages to northern Spain and the veneration of his final resting place at Santiago de Compostela. I previously mentioned one of Lewis's Narnian Chronicles titled *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, a story of a ship sailing to the utter east with the character of Reepicheep as the image of the ultimate pilgrim.

This notion of pilgrimage is emphasized in the window by the three icons in the royal blue glass beneath the feet of St. James that depict three of the accessories of the pilgrim: the pilgrim's staff, the pilgrim's purse, and the scalloped shell, the badge of the pilgrim. All of this seems to serve the theme of pilgrimage associated with his father's name, and it is important to remember the date of the window's installation. It was 1933, just months after the publication of Lewis's first successful book, *The Pilgrim's Regress*, written in Belfast and dedicated to one of Lewis's closest Belfast friends.

The inclusion of an image of St. Mark in the window in his namesake church is not surprising. But I note that the church icon for St. Mark, the lion, is also closely associated with the symbol for Venice, the city traditionally noted as the saint's final resting place. In the window commissioned by Lewis, the artist has wrapped around the shoulders of St. Mark the image of a winged lion. The other lion motif on the old rectory door has already been described above. These images evident in the church traditionally known as the Lion on the Hill had formed an enduring place in Lewis's mind long before he wrote about some of them. It is little wonder that when Lewis wrote the Narnian Chronicles, the lion should come bounding in, as he put it, and pull the whole story together. These images, planted in his mind during his early days in Belfast, reappear in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

What reason can be advanced for the inclusion of an image of St. Luke in the window? Lewis gives us no direct explanation, but there is a clue in the fact that St. Luke is described in the Gospels as a physician. In describing the events of 1908 regarding his mother's illness and death, Lewis says that the family lost her gradually—to morphine, to the illness, and to the medics. His concluding childhood memories of Flora were of her being attended to more and more by the doctors and nurses and less and less by the family. The image of St. Luke (the doctor) is therefore a fitting image of these memories. In the window, the winged ox is wrapped around the shoulders of St. Luke, indicating service to mankind. The images of the small buildings that fill the periphery of the window are not images of local Irish architecture. They are more Italian in appearance. They, with St. Luke, may serve as a fitting memorial to his mother, whose name was Florence and who spent childhood years in Italy.



In a letter to Arthur Greeves dated August 17, 1933, Lewis describes the visit by himself and Warnie to Belfast for the specific purpose of enabling Warnie to see the newly installed window in St. Mark's: "We... then went down Circular Rd to St. Mark's to see the window which W. (Warnie) had never seen. He was delighted with it."<sup>4</sup>

Each time I visit St. Mark's Church in East Belfast with a touring group, I mention two observations apropos to Lewis's life and writing.

First, his privileged birth and Christian upbringing did not make him a disciple of Jesus. He was brought up in a Christian environment, where he learned the truth of Scripture and was introduced to the sacraments of the church. He was christened in St. Mark's and confirmed as a teenager. Yet he came to reject Christianity and adopted for a time an aggressively atheistic worldview. Years later he learned that the path of Christian pilgrimage was entered not through privilege or religious observance but through personal commitment via Him who said, "I am the door" (John 10:9).

My visits to St. Mark's also draw me to the theme of pilgrimage in Lewis's writing. They help me to appreciate the description of Lewis's own intellectual journey as described in *The Pilgrim's Regress*. I trust this encourages you to read or reread that particular book.

I also encourage you to reconsider the whole notion raised by Lewis in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*—of life's voyage or journey or pilgrimage. My challenge is for you to read this Narnian story and focus on Reepicheep. He is portrayed comically at times by Lewis and by the films, but Reepicheep is the ultimate pilgrim, even when the chips are down. He is resolute in traveling to the utter east and to Aslan's country.

From time to time, all followers of Jesus need to reassess where they are on the pilgrim pathway and journey. Let us resolve like Reepicheep, or the pilgrim in John Bunyan's famous hymn ("He Who Would Valiant Be") to be valiant, resolved, and constant in following the Master. ❖

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Our Father refreshes us on the journey with some pleasant inns, but will not encourage us to mistake them for home.

*C.S. Lewis*

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### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> J.C. Beckett and Anthony M. Wilson, *The Lion on the Hill: A History of St. Mark's Church, Dundela, Belfast: 1878–1998* (Belfast: Minprint, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (London and Glasgow UK: Collins Clear-Type Press, 1967), 18.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>4</sup> C.S. Lewis and Walter Hooper, *They Stand Together: The Letters of C.S. Lewis to Arthur Greeves (1914–1963)* (Cambridge: Macmillan Publishers Ltd.), 456.

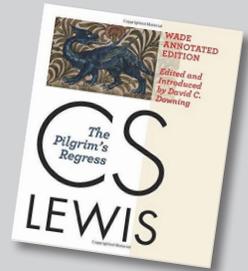


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Three short film pieces on aspects of the life of C.S. Lewis can also be viewed on the website.

## RECOMMENDED READING

C.S. Lewis, *The Pilgrim's Regress: The Wade Annotated Edition*, David C. Downing, editor, introduction (Eerdmans, 2014)

This annotated edition of *The Pilgrim's Regress*, produced in collaboration with the Marion E. Wade Center in Wheaton, Illinois, helps readers recover the richness of Lewis's allegory. Often considered obscure and difficult to read, the book nonetheless remains a witty satire on cultural fads, a vivid account of spiritual dangers, and an illuminating tale for generations of pilgrims old and new.



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