

## “Different Tales”

J.K. Rowling’s *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* has been selling at a rate of two copies a second around the world. The book, a slim collection of five stories set in the world of Rowling’s creation Harry Potter, has sold over two and a half million copies worldwide since it was published three weeks ago. The sales have raised over four million pounds (multiply that by two for Canadian dollars) for the charity Rowling co-founded, the Children’s High Level Group, which works with over a quarter of a million vulnerable children in central and eastern Europe.

I spoke with one mother this week, who happens to be the minister at St. John’s Strawberry Hill, and told her I was going to be using *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* as my traditional pop-culture sermon illustration tonight. She had heard of it, in fact she said, she thinks that her daughter might be receiving from different relatives four copies.

I suggested that she should read it first, that the book should have a Parental guidance recommended sticker on it, which means some material may not be suitable for all children. Some of the tales are dark indeed.

*The Tale of Three Brothers* speaks about the use and abuse of power. True to the fairy tale genre the eldest brothers abuse their power and died horrible gruesome deaths. The younger humble brother does not abuse power and lives to a ripe old age. The tale illustrates advice that Dumbledore once gave to Harry Potter about accepting Death and embracing life: *“Do not pity the dead, Harry. Pity the living, and above all, those who live without love.”* The youngest brother did not try to cheat Death or harm others with his power; instead, he used his gift to live simply and without fear of Death, so that at the end of a long and happy life, he was able to go willingly from this world.

All of Rowling’s tales are morality tales that invite us to care for the stranger, treasure a loving heart and

know that we are all mortal. But why do the tales need to be so dark?

Bruno Bettelheim’s book *The Uses of Enchantment* suggests that these types of stories are a way of dealing with horrific experiences that cannot be named any other way. Horrible monsters give visual expression to feelings that cannot otherwise be described. It is good to give names to indescribable feelings or things we don’t understand, things like life and death. So tales need to be told.

You may know that the Bible is the best selling book of all time at over six billion copies. But this obscures a more startling fact: the Bible is the best-selling book of the year, every year. Twice as many Bibles are sold every year compared to the latest books by J.K. Rowling. But there is more, the Bible should also come with a parental guidance warning. Dark tales here too, even the Christmas stories.

The first story written about Jesus doesn’t even have a birth story in it. It begins with John the Baptist whose head gets cut off by the King and served on a platter to a dancing girl. The last gospel, that of John, begins with a poem to the Word made flesh. Only Matthew and Luke tell birth stories, but they are stories with a difference. They seek to challenge the reader to make decisions about how to live life in a world whose complexity cannot be understood, where feelings and anxiety run high and fear of death is constant.

Matthew asks the question *“Who is your King and what is your Rule? Is it the violent power of a King like Herod or the non-violent power of Jesus?”*

Matthew created his story about the birth of Jesus in parallel with the birth of Moses. In that story, Pharaoh of Egypt tried to destroy the Israelites by killing all their male infants—but the bravery of the Hebrew midwives,

*Continued on page 2*

*Continued from page 1*

the strategy of his mother Jochebed, and the decency of Pharaoh's own daughter (all females, you will notice) saved the child in his papyrus basket among the reeds of the Nile. So Matthew tells the story of Jesus escaping to Egypt because King Herod is the new Pharaoh attempting to kill any future competition. Notice this is the reverse of the Moses story. Moses fled Egypt to escape death.

In Jewish tradition, a predestined child was usually conceived not from a virgin but from aged and/or infertile parents. That was also a later traditional story about Moses. Matthew, reverses this special birth and adds in one special element of his own—namely, the virgin birth.

Matthew also tells of the Magi who are guided westward by a star just as the ancestors of the emperor Augustus, descended from the goddess Venus, had been guided westward from Troy to Italy by her star 1,000 years before. But the Magi are guided not to a palace, but rather to an animal shelter.

The Matthew birth story is told with all these opposite images, to emphasize the question. Who do you choose? Caesar—the way of peace through power and violence or Jesus—peace by compassionate love and non-violence. In our world consumed with wars, it is still a question that needs to be answered.

The birth narratives are political and they are also personal. In these stories the two cannot be separated. We cannot have peace of mind unless there is peace on earth. So these stories speak to us many centuries later about all our hopes and fears.

And the promise is this. In the birth of Jesus, God has begun a new way of living for the world. These things we know. Peace through violence is not the answer. Power over others does not bring peace. Accumulation of wealth does not bring happiness. We know all this.

What we may not know because of the noise of the world is that God is waiting to be born at this very moment. And it is only if you can escape the holiday parties and come to the place where the humblest of the poor are; in the time of Jesus these were the shepherds, you will hear the songs of angels declaring that a baby is to be born and this will change everything.

And if you dare to make a journey, casting aside the wisdom of the world, you will find it not in the palaces of

power and wealth, but in a feeding trough for animals, a newborn who will reveal to you the foolishness of God that is wiser than any human wisdom.

And if you come, with all your hopes and fears, and worship at the manger, you will know in the stillness of the night, the story of God with us—a story to live.