

G. K. Chesterton – Warmth, Wit and Whimsy.

I want to start a series of messages today – messages that are built around people’s stories.

We are going to do something similar in the evening.

The stories I want to tell in the morning sessions are going to be stories based on historical figures.

“I hate history!!!”

Don’t think of this as a history lesson, think of it as people’s stories.

Everyone loves a story.

Hebrews 11 is a divine mandate to listen to people’s stories.

It is a passage of Scripture that references story after story of faith; one person after another – Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and on and on it goes.

The unmistakable implication of this chapter is that if we hear about the faith of others, and seek to imitate them, we are enabled to **“lay aside every weight and run with endurance the race that is set before us.”** {**Hebrews 12:1**}

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Their example helps us to run our race.

God has always used human agents and their stories to stir and encourage his people.

Reflection on the stories of the faithful is a major way we can learn the wisdom of God's ways.

Hebrews 13:7-8.

“Remember your former leaders, who spoke God's message to you. Think back on how they lived and died, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.”

Listening to the stories of people from another time safeguards us from what **C. S. Lewis** called **‘Chronological snobbery;’** the foolishness of thinking that our age and time is the sum of wisdom.

Oz Guinness comments,

“A distinctive feature of the modern world is its passion for the present and its fascination with the future at the expense of the past. Progress, change, choice, novelty and the myth of the ‘newer-the-truer,’ and the ‘latest-is-greatest’ reign unchallenged, while ideas and

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convictions from earlier times are bound up in the cobwebbed attic of nostalgia and irrelevance.”

Being a student of people’s stories is an **exercise in theology.**

Theology which is, at its simplest, seeking to know God, emerges from these real lives devoted to His cause.

Being a student of people’s stories is an **exercise in psychology.**

It deepens our understanding of human nature, including, hopefully, our own.

Being a student of people’s stories is an **exercise in prophecy.**

Prophetic vision involves not just foresight {future} or insight {present} but also hindsight {past}.

With that as an introduction to why we are going to study these lives, let me tell you whose lives we are going to look at.

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You will be more familiar with some rather than others.

You will have heard me quote from them all – some more than others.

The ones we are going to look at in this series are all relatively modern – by that I mean they lived out the majority of their lives in the 20th Century.

We are going to start with four.

We are looking at these in chronological order.

1. G. K. Chesterton.
2. C. S. Lewis.
3. Dietrich Bonhoeffer.
4. Mother Teresa.

As we examine their lives I want to ask, ‘what can they; what do they teach us?’

How can we be enriched by their faith so as to run our race more effectively?

G. K. Chesterton is a study in warmth, wit and whimsy.

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Gilbert Keith Chesterton was born in 1874 in Campden Hill, Kensington – south central London.

He was born into a middle class family, the eldest son of a Real Estate agent.

Both his parents were interested in the arts and Chesterton grew up in a liberal environment amidst water paintings, toy theaters, photography, and with a love for English literature.

His schooling was erratic and he certainly gave no indication of his ultimate genius.

He was, on the contrary, noted for his inattention, the slovenliness of his personal appearance and his total incompetence in sporting endeavours.

The informal education he received from his father, who took him to museums, galleries and explored with him the literary classics, counted for much more than his formal schooling.

Although his school reports were noted for mediocrity, his school masters obviously saw his potential.

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One school master, on a report night commented, **“Six foot of genius! Cherish him Mrs. Chesterton, cherish him.”**

They did and his home life was a happy, secure one.

Because of his apparent minimal academic ability {as distinct from intellectual ability} he wasn't able to go with his friends to Oxford or Cambridge.

Instead, following his own inclinations and with parental support, he attended some drawing classes and then went on to Slade School of Fine Art.

After a year however he was asked to leave since the faculty felt they had not been able to teach him anything beyond the rudiments of drawing – skills which he already possessed.

He noted in his later autobiography that at this time in his life he felt a **“distinct attraction to evil.”**

He gravitated towards nihilism as a general philosophy of life.

{Nihilism is the belief that life is without any meaning, purpose or intrinsic value}

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He also began to dabble in occult spiritualism, which was quite fashionable among the metropolitan elite at this time.

He turned away from it quickly and later commented, **“That calling down powers, thrones and dominations was an ancient and perilous sin.”**

Though he considered himself an agnostic he developed distinctly pro-Christian leanings.

He knew intuitively that the cosmos did not explain itself.

He wrote,

“I came to believe that the magic of the Cosmos must have meaning and meaning must have someone to mean it. There is something personal in the world.”

He recognized the need to give thanks for membership of the Cosmos but commented,

“Birth itself seemed to be a birthday present, but to who was one to give thanks, if not God?”

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He wrote in his journal one Christmas day,

“Good News, but if you ask me what it is, I know not.

It is a track of feet in the snow.

It is a lantern showing a path,

It is a door set open.”

{**C. S. Lewis** was particularly impacted by Chesterton as I will describe later.

Lewis wrote a poem to commemorate his conversion and I think there is a reference to this little note of Chesterton's.

What the Bird Said Early in the Year:

**I heard in Addison's Walk a bird sing clear
This year the summer will come true this year, this year
Winds will not strip the blossom from the apple trees
this year, nor want of rain destroy the peas
This year time's nature will no more defeat you
nor all its promised moments in their passing cheat you
This time they will not lead you round and back
to Autumn one year older by the well worn track
This year, this year, as all these flowers foretell**

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**we shall escape the circle and undo the spell
Often deceived yet open once again your heart
quick, quick, quick, quick, **the gates are drawn apart.**}**

Chesterton went into the publishing world.

Ironically he worked first of all for a small publishing house that specialized in publishing material on the occult.

He commented that,

“I worked through a backlog of submitted manuscripts; sending most of them back to addresses which I should imagine to be private asylums.”

Later he moved to a mainstream publishing house and in so doing launched his own career as an author and literary and social critic.

He went on to write around 80 books, several hundred poems, 200 short stories, 4000 essays and several plays.

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He was to become known as a literary and social critic, a historian, a playwright, a novelist and later a Christian apologist.

In 1901 he married Francis Bloggs. She was a believer and had a significant impact on Chesterton.

He later dedicated one of his poems, 'The Ballad of the White Horse,' to the woman **“who bought the Cross to me.”**

Along with her influence there developed in Chesterton an intellectual conviction regarding life that he realized was, in its essentials, the same as the ancient faith of the Church.

So he made a full-blooded conversion to historic Christianity and later in his faith journey became a Roman Catholic.

The reason for the later shift was that the Anglican Church of which he had initially been a part was struggling at that time with a significant accommodation with modernism and liberalism.

Chesterton saw the constancy of the Roman Catholic teaching office and admired it profoundly.

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He continued his prolific writing career until he died of congestive heart failure on the 14th June 1936.

Why would I choose Chesterton to look at?

What does his story have to say to me; to us?

I titled this message “G. K. Chesterton; warmth, wit and whimsy.”

Let me explain why.

From a very early age, Chesterton seemed to have, what Adam Nichols in his book entitled, ‘G. K. Chesterton, Theologian,’ termed, ‘**a gift of friendship.**’

There was immense personal warmth in Chesterton that enabled him to capture the goodwill of a far wider range of people than would be imagined.

People genuinely liked him.

Later in his career he engaged in serious, but witty and friendly debates about his Christian faith with people like George Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells and Bertrand Russell.

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These were men with whom Chesterton disagreed with profoundly in terms of their philosophy and worldviews.

On one occasion he wrote of these men,

“Their philosophies are quite solid, quite coherent and quite wrong.”

There was no pulling of punches in his assessment of his opponent’s arguments.

But Chesterton was able, by virtue of his personal warmth, to engage in ongoing and at times very funny dialogue with these vehemently anti Christian men.

The debates never descended into the polemic and animosity that we see in the public arena so often today.

In fact, largely due to Chesterton’s personal warmth, many of these men became his lifelong friends.

According to Chesterton’s autobiography, he and Shaw played the role of cowboys in a silent movie that was never released.

Chesterton was a very large man.

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He was 6' 4" in height and was as wide as he was high.

He weighed in at 130kgs {290lbs, 21 stone}

Apparently Shaw was as skinny as Chesterton was fat.

One day Chesterton remarked to Shaw,

“To look at you, anyone would think that a famine had struck England.”

Shaw, equally as witty as Chesterton famously replied,

“To look at you, anyone would think you caused it!”

Chesterton was a disarmingly funny man and much of his humour was at his own expense.

On one occasion during WW I he was walking down the street.

A woman confronted him and demanded to know why he wasn't out at the front.

He replied,

“Madam, if you will move to the side and look at me you will see I am out at the front!”

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On another occasion he publically told the story of getting stuck in a car door. He commented that he would have tried to exit out sideways, but he said, **“As you can see I have no sideways.”**

He became very well known and much in demand as a speaker. {He was paid \$7000 a speech – in the 1930’s!}

He tells in his autobiography of a lecture tour he did in America during the 1930’s.

He wrote,

“I went to Notre Dame and inflicted 90 lectures on people who never did me any harm.”

In a time of self referential, self obsessed celebrities, his self depreciating humour won him many friends.

He had an unrivaled ability to say things in a unique and often memorable manner.

Let me share a couple of my favourites –

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Chesterton described in one of his works how the historic Christian faith has survived despite the vicious attacks aimed against it.

He commented,

“At least five times the faith has to all appearances ‘gone to the dogs.’ In each of these five cases it was the dog that died.”

On another occasion he was talking about the Book of Revelation and some of the wild, fanciful interpretations that have developed around it.

He wrote,

“Although St. John the Evangelist saw many strange monsters in his vision, he saw no creature so wild as one of his own commentators!”

Some religious people thought Chesterton was too frivolous about serious things.

Chesterton responded,

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**“What can one be but frivolous about serious things?
Without frivolity they are simply too tremendous.”**

C. S. Lewis who was a great fan of Chesterton’s writings once commented,

“His humour was the kind I liked best – not ‘jokes’ imbedded in the page like currants in a cake, still less (what I cannot endure), a general tone of flippancy and jocularity, but the humour which is not in any way separable from the argument.... the sword glitters not because the swordsman set out to make it glitter, but because he is fighting for his life and therefore moving it very quickly.”

Chesterton was noted for his absent-mindedness even though he was hailed as one of the genius’ of his time.

He once telegraphed his wife,

**“Am at Market Harborough {stop} where should I be?
{stop}”**

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Apparently she responded with a one word telegram,
“Home.”

In Chesterton, warmth, wit and whimsy met.

By ‘whimsy’ I mean – a little dreamy; not taking yourself too seriously; finding humour even in one’s mistakes.

As a Christian apologist, he shared his faith with style.

In many ways he was the ‘prophet of common sense.’

He was able to say memorably, what others could often see and sense but not necessarily articulate.

He commented once that common sense was simply,
“knowing how long to pray when the food is getting cold.”

He had a profound impact on his age.

C. S. Lewis was significantly impacted by Chesterton.

Lewis was a soldier during WW I and was wounded at the Battle of Somme in France.

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While he was recovering in the field hospital he encountered Chesterton's writings for the first time.

He read a volume of essays that Chesterton had penned and he commented,

“I had never heard of him before and had no idea what he stood for, nor could I quite understand why he made such an immediate conquest of me. It might have been expected that my pessimism, my atheism and my hatred of sentiment would have made him to me the least congenial of all authors.”

Lewis enjoyed Chesterton's humour, but above all he said,

“I liked him for his goodness; I felt the charm of his goodness.”

Lewis went on to say, in his own witty style,

“In reading Chesterton I did not know what I was letting myself in for. A young man who wants to remain a sound atheist cannot be too careful in his reading. There are traps everywhere. God, if I may say so, is very unscrupulous.”

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Lewis also said,

“Chesterton had more sense than all other moderns put together. I thought him the most sensible man alive, apart from his Christianity.”

Lewis was later to say that Chesterton’s book, **‘The Everlasting Man,’** was the best book on Christianity that he had ever read.

Although Chesterton obviously wrote for another generation and another time, so much of what he wrote seems so relevant to our postmodern age.

On one occasion he was lamenting people’s openness to talk about everything in minute detail, except when it came to talking about God and eternal issues.

“People are encouraged to discuss details in art, politics, and literature {we could add sex} and to have an opinion on everything from tram cars to Botticelli. A man may turn over and explore a million objects, but he must not mention God...” then in typical Chesterton fashion added, **“Everything matters, except everything!”**

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Many of the philosophers of his time, including his friend H. G. Wells were contemplating and glorifying suicide as a way out of what they perceived as the purposelessness of life.

Chesterton, although seeing the madness of the age, felt a different response was called for,

“One must hate the world enough to want to change it and love it enough to think it is worth changing.”

To the postmodern skeptics of our time who claim there are no moral absolutes but then denounce racism, sexual exploitation and the economic exploitation of the poorer nations, and any number of other issues, Chesterton has something to say.

“All denunciation implies a moral doctrine of some kind and the modern skeptic doubts not only the institution he denounces, but the doctrine by which he denounces it. Thus he writes one book complaining that imperial oppression insults the purity of women, and then writes another book, a novel in which he insults it himself. As a

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politician he will cry out that war is a waste of life, and then as a philosopher that all of life is waste of time. A Russian pessimist will denounce a policeman for killing a peasant, and then prove by the highest philosophical principles that the peasant ought to have killed, himself. A man denounces marriage as a lie and then denounces aristocratic profligates for treating it as a lie.

The man of this school goes first to a political meeting where he complains that savages are treated as if they were beasts. Then he takes his hat and umbrella and goes on to a scientific meeting where he proves that they practically are beasts. In short, the modern revolutionist, being an infinite skeptic, is forever engaged in undermining his own mines. In his book on politics he attacks men for trampling on morality; in his book on ethics he attacks morality for trampling on men. Therefore the modern man in revolt becomes practically useless for all purposes of revolt. By rebelling against everything he has lost his right to rebel against anything.”

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Another pithy Chesterton observation so relevant to our age of tolerance is,

“Tolerance is the virtue of those who don’t believe in anything!”

He also famously observed as people give up faith in God,

“When they cease to worship God they do not worship nothing; they worship anything.”

Let me conclude with one more observation from Chesterton regarding man made in the image of God and how this truth should make us respond to the human need we see around us.

“If we are to save the oppressed, we must have two apparently antagonistic emotions in us at the same time. We must think the oppressed man intensely miserable, and at the same time intensively attractive and important. We must insist with violence upon his degradation; we must insist with the same violence upon his dignity. For if we relax by one inch the one

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assertion, men will say he does not need saving. And if we relax by one inch the other assertion, men will say he is not worth saving. The optimists will say that reform is needless. The pessimists will say that reform is hopeless. We must apply both simultaneously to the same oppressed man; we must say that he is a worm and a god.”

I think as we contemplate Chesterton’s story we can learn so much from this warm, witty, sensible man.

Our society sees Christians so often as ‘nay-sayers.’

We are known most often for what we are against.

We often come across in our defense of faith as angry, bigoted bores.

I think we need some Chesterton’s who with warmth, wit and whimsy will once again present the historic faith of Christianity to their peers in such a sensible, attractive manner.

How you share your faith is almost as important as the faith you share.

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Chesterton was a master from whom we could learn so much.