

# Live Large, Dream Small

BY KYLE CHILDRESS

**God is calling us to be a hobbit church in a dark world.**

**We are called to dream small—to live within limits, instead of destroying creation so we can have more. At the same time, we are called to live large—to live with courage and passion as we give ourselves to the greatest quest of serving God in peace, justice, and harmony.**

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**W**hat would we do if we had power? I mean real power, the kind of power to destroy evil and bring about the sort of world that we think we should have? Would we use it? What would this power do to us? James Forbes says that an important question to ask about any religion or institution or even an individual, is what do they do when they get power? In J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, this is not a theoretical question.

The power in question is the Ring, which gives its wearer the ability to accomplish great things, even destruction of one's enemies. Nine walkers, a fellowship of unlikely friends, are chosen—not to use the Ring of Great Power, but to destroy it. They are not even to use it in defense of the good, however tempting that may be; they are to give up this great power, rather than use it. This small fellowship of friends, bound together in their hatred of evil and their increasing self-surrendering regard for one another, set out upon a great Quest to give up and to destroy the Ring of Great Power. They are a distant foretaste of the fellowship we Christians call the church.

The central members of the fellowship, the ones entrusted with the care of the all-powerful Ring and the task of carrying it to destruction, are hobbits. They are small of stature, modest in nature, and temperate in wants. Hobbits are farmers and gardeners who love good land, good food

(they enjoy six meals a day), and good conversation, story-telling, and singing of songs. They smoke pipes and drink ale or beer in the company of their friends. They love children and on special occasions, like a birthday, they give gifts instead of receiving them. Hobbits dwell in low, tunnelled homes dug into the good earth, and have big hairy feet because they travel by foot everywhere, enjoying the world around them as they go. These hobbits have no grandiose uses for the Ring. And this is important. Because their life-aims are modest, the hobbits are not easily swayed to try to do great things with the Ring of Power. Therefore they are the only ones who can be trusted to give up the Ring.

Other characters who are good and wise confess that if they had the Ring, they would be tempted to employ its power for good. But in using the Ring of Power, it begins to use you; eventually you become the servant of coercive Power and as a result, evil triumphs. Thus, the unlikely heroism of the small and weak becomes the glimmer of hope within the story.

#### **ECHOS OF THE OLD, OLD STORY**

In *The Lord of the Rings* we hear echoes of the old, old story—the gospel story. The Apostle Paul, when he urges us to have “the same mind as Christ Jesus,” gives us in Philippians 2:5-11 what is very likely one of the earliest hymns of the church memorized by those preparing for their baptism. We discover who we are called to become by looking at Jesus:

who, though he was in the form of God,  
 did not count equality with God  
 as something to be exploited,  
 but he emptied himself,  
 taking the form of a slave,  
 being born in human likeness.  
 And being found in human form,  
 he humbled himself  
 and became obedient to the point of death—  
 even death on a cross.

This is not simply a passage about Christ’s heavenly pre-existence which he laid aside to become human, observes James McClendon. It is about “Jesus who might have been made a king...but who instead identified himself and his cause with servants and serfs, outcasts and victims, to a degree that led the authorities to arrange his death.”<sup>1</sup> Jesus Christ gave up power and instead became a servant.

Remember when James and John approach Jesus about becoming leaders in their fellowship (Mark 10:35-45; Matthew 20:17-28; cf. Luke 22:24-27)? “Teacher, listen,” they begin, “we’re getting close to Jerusalem. When we get there and you seize power and become king, we want you to give us important positions.” The other disciples overhear this and are angry

because they want cabinet-level positions too. Jesus has to stop on the road and get their attention, "We all know how political power works. We all know how the gentiles do it; how everyone else does it. But it is not that way with us. We don't use coercive power. Instead we are servants."

Leadership in the kingdom, Jesus proclaims, is not coercive. In the Hebrew word "shalom" we have a glimpse of God's kingdom, God's way. Shalom means peace and justice, harmony and well-being; it means reconciled relationships between God and humanity, among ourselves and other people, and with creation. Shalom is what God desires and is bringing into the world. As the prophet Micah announces (4:1-4):

In days to come  
the mountain of the LORD's house  
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,  
and shall be raised up above the hills.  
Peoples shall stream to it,  
and many nations shall come and say:  
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,  
to the house of the God of Jacob;  
that he may teach us his ways  
and that we may walk in his paths."  
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,  
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.  
He shall judge between many peoples,  
and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away;  
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,  
and their spears into pruning hooks;  
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,  
neither shall they learn war any more;  
but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own  
fig trees,  
and no one shall make them afraid;  
for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken.

God does not use violence to bring peace, or force to create harmony and right relationship. God's methods must fit the goal of shalom; they cannot be inconsistent with it. We can no more participate in God's way with tanks and guns, laws passed by congress, and prayers imposed by the state, than we can bring about chastity by means of fornication or peace by means of war.

Even though God's shalom is about nothing less than the peace and reconciliation of all humanity and all creation, God's methods are small and weak and humble. God's shalom is brought about by a baby who is born in a feed trough under a cow shed in a one-red-light town in an over-

looked country in the backwoods of the Roman empire. Instead of using the power of kingship, which was offered him, Jesus becomes the suffering servant. In other words, the way of shalom is the way of the cross.

The cross is not only Jesus' calling, it is our calling as well. Too many Christians today cannot see the inconsistency in wanting to talk about Jesus Christ and having the state help them do the talking. Many see no inconsistency in evangelizing people for Christ and having the Pentagon pave the way. But the way of Jesus Christ is not imposed by the state, forced by a church, coerced by an army, or manipulated by money.

"God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise," Paul writes. "God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God" (1 Corinthians 1:27-29). John Milton echoes the Apostle's point that the kingdom arrives: "by small accomplishing great things, by things deemed weak/subverting worldly strong, and worldly wise/by simply meek."<sup>2</sup>

#### **DREAMING SMALL**

A wonderful scene in *The Lord of the Rings* features the hobbit Samwise Gamgee, the steadfast friend of Frodo, the hobbit who must bear the Ring of Great Power on the quest to destroy it. Sam, a gardener back home in the Shire, is lowly even by hobbit standards. He so loves gardening that all he really wants is to return home and work in his garden; he is not interested in being somebody important. Yet, when Sam realizes that Frodo is slowly being killed by the overwhelming burden of carrying the coercive power of the Ring, Sam takes the Ring and hangs it by a chain around his own neck.

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[Sam] felt himself enlarged, as if he were robed in a huge distorted shadow of himself,... Already the Ring tempted him, gnawing at his will and reason. Wild fantasies arose in his mind; and he saw Samwise the Strong, Hero of the Age, striding with a flaming sword across the darkened land, and armies flocking to his call as he marched.... And then all clouds rolled away, and the white sun

shone, and at his command the vale...became a garden of flowers and trees and brought forth fruit. He had only to put on the Ring and claim it for his own, and all this could be.... In that hour of trial it was the love of his master that helped most to hold him firm; but also deep down in him lived still unconquered his plain hobbit-sense: he knew in the core of his heart that he was not large enough to bear such a burden.... The one small garden of a free

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gardener was all his need and due, not a garden swollen to a realm; his own hands to use, not the hands of others to command.<sup>3</sup>

Sam is tempted by power to fantasize about himself as somebody important. And he dreams large; he dreams that he will conquer for good and impose a garden on his

conquered territories. But what saves him is his humility. He knows who he is: he recognizes that he is not large enough to bear such a burden, that he needs to keep to his own small garden. This knowledge is what saves him. This is why Sam and the hobbits can give up the Ring of Great Power: they do not have an enlarged sense of themselves. They dream small.

#### **LIVING LARGE**

One of my favorite poets is the Welsh Anglican priest R. S. Thomas (1913-2000), who served over forty years in small rural parishes. Thomas was something of a hobbit: he loved God's creation, was humble, and took joy in the simple, small things of life. In his poem, "Lore," he depicts Job Davies, an eighty-five-year-old tough, independent Welsh farmer who cares for his small farm with courage and passion. The poem ends with these haunting words: "Live large, man, and dream small."<sup>4</sup>

That is our calling, also—to live large and dream small. We are to be content in who we are as human beings and with what God has given us; we are to live within limits, instead of destroying creation so we can have more. God calls us to live within humble boundaries of who we are, instead of invading and imposing, even if we think it is in service to a good cause. We are to live within our vows to have and to hold in sickness and in health until death parts us. This is part of what it means to dream small.

At the same time, we are called to live large—to live with courage and passion as we give ourselves to the greatest quest of serving God in peace, justice, and harmony in this old dark world.

“I was vicar of large things in a small parish,” R. S. Thomas said one time. That’s how I see myself. I and my congregation live large things in a small parish; we live out the largest kingdom in this small place.

This world prizes power, success, wealth, and bigness, and it uses violence in the service of power. But God chooses small people to help redeem the world—people who love to eat together and raise children, to serve one another with passion, joy, and courage; people whose church is snug-gled down in the woods, close to the earth. God calls them to be about the large things of shalom—the peace, harmony, justice known in Jesus Christ.

What if God is calling us to be a hobbit church in a dark world? Thanks be to God! Amen and amen.

## NOTES

1 James William McClendon, *Systematic Theology: Doctrine*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 266-267.

2 John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book XII, lines 566-569, in *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose*, edited by Merritt Y. Hughes (Indianapolis, IN: The Odyssey Press, 1957), 467.

3 J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, revised edition, (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 177.

4 R. S. Thomas, “Lore,” *R. S. Thomas: Collected Poems 1945-1990*, (London, Phoenix Press, 1995), 114.

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