

Though he is known as a Christian apologist, for part of his life, the renowned author CS Lewis actually wasn't a Christian at all. He was an atheist. And while his journey back to the faith took time, a big reason it happened was because of a conversation that he had on the evening of September 19, 1931 with his colleague at Oxford. J.R.R. Tolkien, and friend and Hugo Dyson, another English professor.

It is the evening of September 19, 1931.

They stroll down Addison's Walk, a picturesque footpath that runs along the River Cherwell on the grounds of Oxford's Magdalen College. Two of the men — C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien — are particularly engaged with one another, deep inside an animated discussion on the nature of metaphor and myth.

While both men are 30-something war veterans, teach and lecture at Oxford colleges, and share a love of old literature, the two friends are in many ways a study in contrasts.

Lewis has a ruddy complexion and thickly set build. His clothes are loose and shabby. His voice booms as he speaks. Tolkien is slender, dresses nattily, and speaks elusively. Lewis is more brash; Tolkien more reserved.

Besides differences in personality, the men are divided by something more fundamental: Tolkien has been a faithful Catholic since childhood, while Lewis has been a committed atheist since the age of 15.

Over the last few years, however, Lewis' position on God has slowly been softening, partly due to his friendship with Tolkien and the many conversations they've had since first meeting five years prior. The two academics — Tolkien a Professor of Anglo-Saxon; Lewis a Fellow and Tutor of English Literature — initially bonded over a shared love of what Lewis calls "Northerness" — a love of Norse mythology.

At times the men have stayed up until the early hours of the morning, "discoursing of the gods and giants and Asgard." Lewis has often shared with Tolkien his affinity for Baldr — the Norse god of love and peace, forgiveness and justice — who is wrongly killed but comes back to life after Ragnarok (a kind of Viking apocalypse that you may know more about now if you saw the recent Thor movie). He has told his friend that he feels "mysteriously moved" by such stories of sacrifice, death, and resurrection. You can see where this might lead if you are a Christian.

A love of mythology may have brought the friends together, but it has also served as one of Lewis' major stumbling blocks to embracing Christianity. As a young man he had decided that the faith was simply "one mythology among many," and was just as fabricated as all the rest. To quote him: "All religions, that is, all mythologies to give them their proper name, are merely man's own invention — Christ as much as Loki."

Yet as much as Lewis wished to hold onto this position, something was tugging at Lewis' heart. Despite his best defenses, he felt a prodding within, and believed it was God himself who was

actively hunting him like a deer; “I never had the experience of looking for God,” he later said. “It was the other way round.”

If God was indeed “stalking” Lewis, this pursuit often took the form of conversations with his friends — not only Tolkien, but other bright scholars who saw no contradiction between their intellectualism and their faith. They challenged Lewis’ conviction that the head and the heart could not be combined, peppered him with searching questions he struggled to answer to his satisfaction, and ultimately set him off on a journey to see if rational underpinnings for theism could be found.

Much to Lewis’ dismay, his project was a success. Though he did not want to acknowledge the existence of God, did not want “to go back to the bondage of believing in any old (and already decaying) superstition,” and wished not to be “interfered with” by Deity or anyone else, he found that, to his mind, the evidence indeed pointed to there being some kind of higher power in the universe. And so in he knelt down, “admitted that God was God,” and became the “most reluctant convert in all of England.”

To Lewis it was a purely rational decision, and while he became a theist that night, his belief did not extend beyond an unknown, impersonal God into a faith in Christ specifically. It would take two more years, and one transformative conversation begun along Addison’s Walk, for him to make that leap.

Lewis takes that walk not only with Tolkien, but also Hugo Dyson, who teaches English at Reading University and is, like Tolkien, a committed Christian. Amidst a swirl of leaves a warm wind has dislodged from the trees, Lewis lays out his remaining obstacle to embracing his friends’ faith. He tells them that he can conceive of Christ as an ultimate exemplar in how to live a virtuous life, but that he struggles with the whole idea of his enacting an atonement that saves mankind. He couldn’t see “how the life and death of Someone Else (whoever he was) 2,000 years ago could help us here and now.” Phrases like “sacrifice” and “the Blood of the Lamb,” seem to Lewis to be “either silly or shocking.”

Tolkien and Dyson listen to their friend’s concerns, and decide to retire to Lewis’ lodgings at the college to continue the discussion. The men settle themselves in Lewis’ room and take out their pipes. As the clock ticks past midnight, and the room fills with curls of smoke, both Dyson and Tolkien share insights from their own journey to faith. But it is Tolkien’s arguments that will ultimately hold the most sway. The professor unfolds to Lewis a different way of looking at the centerpiece of the Christian gospels — one that ironically embraces, rather than flees from, the idea of it being a myth.

Myths, Tolkien explains, are not fairy tales, intentional lies, or mere fabrications, but are instead powerful vehicles for revealing the world’s deepest truths. All myths, he argues, illuminate layers and dimensions of existence that are often missed by our narrow human vision. In this way, they can actually be more “real” than what we normally call reality. Tolkien posits that mythmakers exercise a God-given power, and act as “sub-creators” who share pieces of the ultimate Truth that is hidden from plain sight. All the world’s myths then serve as prisms through which we can see fragments of divine light. Stories, Tolkien argues, are sacramental.

Lewis continued to talk with Tolkien and Dyson until three in the morning. And as he continued to turn over their conversation in the days that followed, his belief in the Passion story grew, until he could write to a friend on October 1: “I have just passed on from believing in God to definitely believing in Christ — in Christianity. I will try to explain this another time. My long night talk with Dyson and Tolkien had a great deal to do with it.”

Lewis has not only passed on from theism but to a wholly new path for his life. He is destined to become the most famous Christian apologist of his time, the creator of his own illuminating myths in the form of the Narnia series, and a writer whose works continue to be discovered and prized today. A single conversation begun on Addison’s Walk turned out to be something like a railroad switch — diverting Lewis from the track he was on, and sending him in a completely new direction.

A big reason this happened though is because of what Tolkien and Dyson did for Lewis. They talked about their faith. They challenged him. They sat up with him until 3 in the morning and spoke to him in his language. And it led Lewis in an entirely new direction. This is what happens when one takes what they are given from God, and passes it on.

Our Gospel this week is a challenging one. A landowner gives talents to his servants, five, two and one. A talent is a sizable amount of money, so all are given plenty. Two go out and invest their money; one buries it out of fear. The two who return with more than they were given are rewarded; the third who gives back what he has is punished.

Now we should not read this as a way to practice business, or think of the third servant as a bad person. He was understandably nervous, and he did not steal the money from his master. The point that the parable makes is God calls us to be like Him. And God, as love itself, is constantly giving. That is the inner nature of the Trinity, Father, Son and Spirit united in love. That is what we see at Mass, God giving of Himself in the Body and the Blood sacrificed for us. But as God loves us, we are called to bring people to Him. To give away the love that we are given. To “go and announce the Gospel of the Lord” as we hear in the final dismissal.

There are many ways that this happens, and many homilies that could be written from the parable. You can think of acts of charity and kindness, talk about service, a concern for the poor, caring for your family. But while all these things are important, I think that in our modern world, perhaps the hardest thing to do can be to get to the point that Tolkien got to, where he not only talked about the faith, but did so for hours on end, and helped his friend truly find God.

The problem is our faith is under attack. People get nervous talking about religion. People don’t want to think about the fact that maybe their lifestyle choice is immoral, or the fact that they will one day die. People don’t want to be challenged to change their attitude or think about how they treat others even in their own family. You and I though are given faith as a virtue, and it needs to be spread. We need to give it away, and the paradox is as we do give our faith away, as we live it out, it will in turn become stronger.

And so, as you think about this parable, one takeaway is to think about how we are all blessed and given the gift of faith that comes through our baptism as a virtue. And the challenge for us is to have that faith grow so we can stand before God one day and return it with interest.

Certainly as I talked about last week, part of that is increasing it through prayer, spiritual reading, and understanding the content of our faith. But this week we can think about the two servants who risk what they are given, and think about how we can do that with our faith. Because this perhaps has the biggest risk of all.

Doing an act of kindness for someone isn't too risky. It can cost us time or even money. But what about talking about what you believe? People not only might feel uncomfortable, they might label you. You can be subject to ridicule and indifference. But you just might do what Tolkien did, and help save a soul.

I think it starts with the way we live our life. As I've quoted Saint Francis before, preach the Gospel, if necessary, use words. Maybe someone sees a crucifix in your cubicle. Or others see how you make Mass a priority. Or you give of your time to help those in need. Or you say "yes" to some things and "no" to others that are wrong. That is a form of evangelization.

But where it can get tough is when we get to the point of announcing it, of being an evangelist. Actions matter big time, but words will always be necessary too. So challenge yourself to take the risk. Don't bury the faith out of fear. Talk to loved ones who may be away from the Church and ask them what happened in a non-judgmental way. When you see someone making a bad decision morally, find a place in private where you can express your concerns to them. Sign up to be a catechist. Don't give in when the kids say "we don't want to go to Mass" because they want to sleep in or there is a traveling sports league game. When people over dinner bring up aspects of our faith such as the pope or the moral teachings of the Church on marriage, unborn life, etc., talk about it with them. And maybe with your friends, especially if they aren't active church goers, you can do what Tolkien did and invest the time into having a real conversation, something that seems to be happening less and less these days, and patiently journeying with them as you do what he did and lay out the case for Christ.

The other day at the school Mass, I asked the kids what they were hoping Santa might bring. I got some responses from things that will be cool gifts having to do with Batman and Superman and other fun games. But for all we'll be spending on gifts, how long do they really last before they are replaced or outgrown or outdated? By all means, getting gifts is a good thing to do. But while we might not be afraid to rack up credit card debt at Christmas, sometimes we can be afraid to give someone something far greater than a Playstation or a new car, and that's a renewed faith because we are afraid of how that conversation might go, what they might label us as, or what they might think. Take the risk. Take the journey with them. For even if they might not see it right away, because you take that risk they, like CS Lewis, will start to think. But that can only happen if you don't bury the faith, but give it to others. It's something for us all to do, so may we all give what we've been given by God so we can one day meet those people in heaven who needed that gift in their life more than any other, and are there not because of anything material we gave them, but because we gave them the gift of our time, our faith and love and helped to put them on the right track to the Kingdom of God.