

## ***Looking for the Holy Graal in a Village Church***

Christine Sunderland

In Charles Williams' supernatural thriller *War in Heaven*, an exquisitely constructed story pits three good characters against three evil ones in the protection and attempted destruction, respectively, of the Holy Graal (old spelling of *Grail*), discovered in the English village of Fardles, or *Castra Parvulorum*, the Camp of the Children. Caught in the center of this drama is a generic family: a worried father and husband; a cheerful mother and wife; their innocent four-year-old son.

As a prologue to this battle between Heaven and Hell, set in the inter-war years of Williams' present day, we are introduced to a murder, a publishing house, and the murderer himself, with a nod to the conventions of the English mystery. The first line of the *Prelude* reads, with its underlying humor:

The telephone bell was ringing wildly, but without result, since there was no-one in the room but the corpse. (7)

Soon, however, the characters gather around the body and we see into their souls, and the war begins.

Charles Williams' characters, indeed, carry allegorical weight, yet their interior struggles give them depth. We stand at once with them and outside them, experiencing their humanity as well as their mythic dimension.

Our trio of good men includes: Mornington, who seeks to save the Graal of the heroic tradition; the Duke, who seeks to save the Graal of Christ's Last Supper; the Archdeacon, who seeks to save the Graal of the Eucharist. These nuances weave through the story, and I was particularly touched by the Archdeacon's use of psalms, often ending a statement with, "His mercy endureth forever," reinforcing the power of continuous prayer and "waiting on God."

Our trio of evil men, in various stages of corruption, includes: Persimmons, an Englishman who dabbles in the occult; Manasseh, a Jew who trades in the occult; Dimitri, a Greek who lives in the occult. While there has been objection in recent years to a Jew being portrayed negatively, it must be seen that the Greek and the Englishman are as well, and even more so. The one or two unfortunate derogatory references to Jews are made by the sadistic Persimmons and the cold Sir Giles, a scholarly observer of ritual.

This depth and weight of character, paired with the dark terror of the satanic, is again lightened by humor. Here the picaresque tradition of English storytelling, of legend and tale, is not at odds with allegory:

So through the English roads the Graal was borne away in the care of a Duke, an Archdeacon, and a publisher's clerk, pursued by a country householder, the Chief Constable of a county, and a perplexed policeman. And these things also perhaps the angels desired to look into. (120)

This fairy tale scene lifts us out of the darkness, to see humanity from Heaven's viewpoint. We are given hope. Yet soon we must return to earth, and the plot grows and intertwines, shaped carefully by the tradition of the quest.

While Williams' syntax can be stiff, at times even confusing, and particularly English or historically literary allusions could be lost on American readers of today, the effort to stay with this novel is rewarded with two central chapters juxtaposed. One powerfully portrays the experience of prayer, and the second, the horror of a Black Mass. And the final chapter brings the reader to a stunningly profound conclusion, a scene I shall treasure in my memory.

Good fiction does what nonfiction cannot do when it portrays through art another or greater dimension of reality. Williams depicts the Archdeacon's sensibility as he carries the Graal:

Carrying it as he had so often lifted its types and companions, he became again as in all those liturgies a part of that he sustained; he radiated from that centre and was but the last means of its progress in mortality. Of this sense of instrumentality he recognized, none the less, the component parts – the ritual movement, the priestly office, the mere pleasure in ordered, traditional, and almost universal movement. (50-51)

Our involvement in sacrament and the world of sacrament, that is, the movement of God upon us in our daily lives, is a major aspect of *War in Heaven*. And thus the novel is, of course, about the battle within each of us, as well as the outer war raging between unseen powers, both imminent and eminent. Battle lines are drawn, waters are not muddied, and we can discern good and evil. Readers familiar with the Inklings, the Oxford writers group of which Williams was a part, will hear echoes of Tolkien and Lewis. There will be moments of assent and simple recognition, as characters hesitate, wondering whether to act or to wait, listening for God's voice. Victory in this war depends, in the end, on individual moral choice acted upon by grace.

And did I mention the man in the dove gray suit who appears and reappears? Ah, yes. More hope. More incarnation. More grace.

*Reviewed by Christine Sunderland, July 2010, posted in <http://www.Catholicfiction.net>*

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