

Termites

An allegory or parable, by S. Katsarkas, translated and
lightly paraphrased by P. Triantaris

The circumstances and personages referred to in the following allegorical narration bring no particular ecclesiastical establishment to my mind (at least, not in all respects); I have never known their sum to exist in such a way, neither are they to be considered as alluding to any particular situation, person, or group – I prefer to leave the interpretation of the entire parable to the reader’s discretion and imagination. The “Great Church of Mulberry Avenue”, its pastor Dr. Diggle, the knowledgeable Mr. Grimsby, the eccentric Mr. Haddock, as well as the final “collapse”, can only be said to belong to the sphere of fantasy; and that is, naturally, among the chief reasons why I believe they are undoubtedly and stingingly true to life.

What can, however, be considered a given, in any church, and in any situation where disciples of the Lord work to promote his Kingdom, are the “termites”; symbolising the infernal powers, which are always eager to erode, deviously and methodically, each and every church or other communion of believers – the symbol for which is the pulpit in this story – and even individual Christians themselves (C.S. Lewis’ *Screwtape Letters* are generally a good point to start in understanding the methods and machinations of devils).

We can deduce, beyond reasonable doubt, that Mulberry Avenue Church is not even close to qualifying as spiritually upstanding: Pastor Diggle suffers from a chronic streak of smugness and self-approval, and finds it impossible to convey, nay even conceive, sound spiritual messages; the parishioners, in their majority, do not seem to rise above the spiritual level of their pastor, and thus restrict themselves to the admiration of the magnificence of their church, and the complacency resulting from their ecclesiastical prestige and social prominence; and, should somebody attempt to bring their attention to truths to the exposure of which they are not accustomed, truths which are neither flattering nor reassuring, they label him a freak, a “sui generis” kind of person.

All things considered, the Great Church of Mulberry Avenue is anything but an exemplar of an ideal church. Most definitely, the “collapse” follows as a natural result. However, it would be folly to forget that, even in the most spiritual and enviable group of Christians out there – or rather, especially in such a group – many serious perils are at bay: sometimes due to the spirit of the world, or the trap of material affluence; in other cases, from convention, or laxness, or formalism, or tradition; in yet others, from the lack of moral integrity, from sins great and small which are not addressed, or from the absence of a spirit of charity and unity; and under certain circumstances – and it is especially then that we are found the most unsuspecting, and the most vulnerable – from spiritual egotism and pharisaism, or obscurantism (in all its forms), or conformity and standardisation, or any manner of novel “other Gospels”...

It was brought in and assembled upon a certain Saturday evening, and in the following morning the entire congregation showered it with admiration. A voluminous and imposing structure, like

as a mediaeval fort, it proceeded to occupy the better part of the easternmost section of the vast sanctuary; with majestic flights of stairs on both sides, spiralling up to the podium, a semi-circular central part rising proudly from the floor to the lectern, with carvings of a variety of scenes, all joining together in a wondrous, harmonious ensemble; stately, “haughty”, one might be tempted to say, made of expensive solid African walnut, shimmering in its well-kempt lustre (thanks be to the deacon, Mr. Arthur King, a finicky man known for his attention to detail, who endeavoured to find woodworkers as finicky and meticulous as himself), the new pulpit of the church was a veritable work of art.

Nevertheless, it was the pastor – the venerable Dr. Aeneas Diggle, born and raised in that same church – who gloried therein probably more than anybody else did. All proud, he ascended the yet-untrodden stairs, positioned himself replete with sturdiness and self-assurance, and doubtlessly, every last congregant would concur on that morning that the pulpit’s first, “maiden” sermon, was as lustrous and fresh as the radiant environment. When the service was over, a majority of the faithful (probably excluding mostly them who would actually sit and listen to the recessional voluntary) eschewed their usual post-service habit of tempestuous chitchat with organ accompaniment, and proceeded to encircle their new acquisition, with some praising it for its ornate carvings, some for its well-curated lustre, some for its exquisite banister, and some for its beauteous proportions. Verily, that Sunday morning became a milestone in the history of the Great Church of Mulberry Avenue; such that some were even tempted to divide that history in two periods, *ante pulpitem* and *post pulpitem*...

The first couple of creaks made their appearance after a considerable passage of time, during a mid-week Bible study assembly. Ominous, worrisome, long-drawn. It was as if an invisible hand had taken upon itself to saw away at one of the steps of the right-hand stairway with a minuscule saw. Alas, on that evening very few attributed any importance to the incident. One among them, in fact, a gentleman by the name of Mr. Peter Grimsby, who fashioned himself an “expert” on many an art and science, deduced that a temperature difference must have exerted strain upon the joints, thus causing the creaking. That explanation appeared all but rational, and managed to convince even the most sceptical ones. After all, most of them were still too dedicated to the admiration of their new pulpit. And at the same time, they were much more dedicated to the various social functions which were organised to and fro by the various groups of the community: ladies’ afternoon tea, men’s breakfast, a dinner party for the centenary of the church, a special evening in honour of veteran ministers and missionaries, and once in a while perhaps some gathering of a religious nature.

Nevertheless, the creaks only proceeded to multiply during the subsequent days. More and more would be heard every day, from an increasing number of spots, increasingly loud and annoying, such that they almost sounded like retorts and objections to the points of the speaker. A great number of people had begun to worry; chief among them, of course, Pastor Aeneas – possibly because, as some remarked with a good deal of spite, their pastor was quite intolerant of demurral, even from inanimate objects...

Some began to treat the issue as one of great gravity. Among them was a certain man named Albert Haddock; quite the eccentric man he was, *sui generis*, and he used to read a lot. It was said that in his home there were entire walls covered in books; some would even jokingly remark that all that reading had “gone to his head”. Deep down, of course, they respected him, because he was an upstanding Christian, and he behaved himself in an earnest and responsible

manner. It was merely that, when he opened his mouth, he spoke things which were quite different to what they had been accustomed to; that's why Dr. Diggle was wary of him, lest he should "puff up the brains of the congregation". Well, from the very first day when Mr. Grimsby had talked of temperature differences and all that jazz, Mr. Haddock had mumbled something about termites and African timber, and none of those present understood a word.

Meanwhile, the situation showed no signs of improvement. The creaking had become so persistent and certain that, every Sunday morning, the children would gather in the front rows and, instead of paying attention to the sermon, count the creaks and place bets on whose prediction of their number would fall closest to the actual number for the day. As it was remarked by one of the children, the "jokester" of his circle: "finally, there is something interesting about church at last!"

Until a moment came when most agreed that something ought to be done. Thus they summoned the merchant who had provided the timber, and the woodworker who had built the pulpit, and together with Mr. Grimsby they carried out an "acoustical and visual" examination of the same, and then they withdrew for a considerable amount of time in the pastor's office, along with Pastor Diggle and the presbytery.

Several parishioners stood waiting outside, sharing their interpretations and predictions. Among them was none other than Albert Haddock himself, who was up in arms by then, and was speaking with confidence and fire: This wood, he said, which comes from Africa, happened to harbour some eggs (nobody knows how, or how many) which later hatched into termites, those fearsome ants which inhabit warm countries. Termites have a distinct talent of eating up wood and digging tunnels inside it, quickly, without a sound, and to such an extent that even great structures can be brought to collapse and ruin in very short time, abruptly and without any external warning signs. In other words, termites do their work in such an underhanded manner and with such admirable aptitude that nothing seems to have changed on the outside, while inwardly the wood is completely ruined. "The same will happen", he would deduce, "to our own pulpit as well. One day we shall gather here for our worship, and we will be greeted with an East end comprising nothing more than an amorphous heap of lustrous logs!" Truth be told, his utterings all sounded convincing and likely, but the parishioners had long ago decided to never take him too seriously, considering him too "academic" and "unrealistic".

At long last, the conferment came to an end. The first one to emerge was Peter Grimsby, a man of clout, who enjoyed the high esteem of his fellow parishioners of Mulberry Avenue, and then followed Dr. Aeneas, the elders, the merchant, and the woodworkers. Mr. Grimsby shot an earnest look at the people who had gathered before the office, corrected the position of his reading glasses, and announced that things were going exactly as he had predicted: there was absolutely no reason to worry. Newly-processed wood always creaks because it has not yet taken its final shape, and thus is sensitive to all manner of external factors, such as temperature variation. "Let us be patient for a little while still, and the creaks will become fewer and further between, until they stop altogether. As for termites and other similar fear-mongering wives' tales", he added, discreetly shooting a glance at Mr. Haddock, "we all concur that such theories could all very well be used as a potent foundation for an interesting work of science fiction." Thus spake Peter Grimsby, content that everybody had agreed with his own opinion, and still more content with his "witty jab" against Albert, and he made his way to the exit, feeling the light of his own sun upon himself...

The collapse came in an unexpected and unannounced manner, justifying the predictions of Mr. Haddock. It was a Sunday morning once more, about a month after the meeting, and most of the congregants were still waiting in the antechamber before the service, when suddenly, a mighty crash was heard from within the sanctuary. Those standing closest to the door had the chance to behold their precious and majestic pulpit tumble to the ground like a house of cards. In a mere few seconds, the pride and joy of the Great Church of Mulberry Avenue had transformed into an amorphous heap of lustrous wood.

Monday morning came, Mr. King showed up with two of the more physically strong parishioners, and they proceeded to load whatever was left of the pulpit onto a truck. Neighbours and passers-by would stand by, eyeing the peculiar sight with curiosity.