

Love, Honour, and the Life of Sir Aglovale de Galis

A sermon delivered at Pembroke College chapel, Oxford, Trinity Term, 2012



I don't have any real qualifications for speaking to you about God; I'm not a priest or even a theologian. But I am a human being, which counts for something. So I'm just going to say something that occurs to me, and you can take that away and do with it what you will.

I'm going to be talking about an author called Clemence Housman. She isn't well remembered now, though you probably know her brother A.E. Housman (the poet), and Laurence Housman, the playwright. There were also three other brothers and another sister.

She was an illustrator, novelist, and activist for women's rights (imprisoned for passive resistance). It has been assumed that Clemence sacrificed her career as a novelist and illustrator in order to look after her brother Laurence, and support his career. She moved in with him when she was 22 and the two were inseparable until Clemence died in 1955, aged 94.

She only published three books, and the last of these, *The Life of Sir Aglovale de Galis* is what I'm going to be talking about tonight. It was published in 1906, but Clemence worked on it for sixteen years.

The story is about Sir Aglovale, a knight of King Arthur's Round Table. He is a fictional character, and King Arthur was probably fictional as well – certainly the romantic King Arthur of literature was fictional anyway. Aglovale isn't well remembered now, though you might have heard of his brothers, Sir Perceval (who glimpses the grail) and Sir Lamorak. He is mentioned very briefly by Sir Thomas Malory, who translated and edited Arthurian stories in the 15th century.

Aglovale is a troubled and angry figure, who commits a series of offences early in the novel and spends the rest of the time either getting angry or repenting of his sinful manner. He is described as a 'dark travesty' and walks 'uneven' like an archetypal villain.

He is very unpopular in Arthur's court for two reasons. Firstly, because he is a terrible jousting, and Arthur's knights are caught up in what T.H. White later called 'games mania': who has the best tiling average, etc. It's bit like the Norrington Table for knights.

Secondly, Aglovale is a wicked character. He is bad-tempered, violent, and a draconian lord. Actually this isn't really the reason why he's so unpopular. It's because he tells the truth.

Aglovale falls in love with a woman, Gilleis, who is herself in love with another knight, called Sir Berel. That knight is captured by the evil Sir Turquine, known to torture and murder others. Aglovale sees Sir Berel being taken away by Sir Turquine, and Sir Berel calls out to Aglovale to get help to rescue him. Aglovale turns away and laughs instead, and doesn't tell the woman, Gilleis what has happened. She finds out in the end and dies of a broken heart.

Aglovale is called before the court to respond to the allegation that this has happened.

“It is truth!” said Aglovale.

Through the hall sounded one great breath of indignation and amazement upon an answer so wildly amiss. Then an angry hum swelling, and the wrathful eyes of King Pellinore, and the cry of Lamorack as he cursed high, brought the unhappy man to his sense.

With the right answer vainly he followed the wrong. “Prove it on my body!” he cried. [But] he could not overtake his error.

Everyone knew what Aglovale had done, but they did not want to hear the truth. What they wanted was for Aglovale to follow the 'right' formula by protecting his honour in a fight. If Aglovale could fight for his innocence, even if everyone knew he was guilty, he would nevertheless keep respect and honour. Instead he brings shame to Arthur's Round Table for ignoring this rule.

Towards the end of the book, Arthur calls Aglovale before him and calls him a sinful knight. It is true that Aglovale is sinful, but that is not why Arthur is so ashamed of him. Instead, it is because Aglovale has no honour in Arthur's eyes. Aglovale kneels before Arthur in repentance, but whilst doing so he recounts, to amazed ears, the king's own faults – which are many. This is like if I was called before the chancellor after failing all my exams, and, whilst kneeling and admitting that I had failed as a student, I said to the chancellor: “yes, but you are wrong as well.” Obviously this is a hypothetical situation. As far as I know Chris Pattern was never responsible for the accidental destruction of a ship of babies. If he was then it's been very well covered up.

Near the end of the novel, Aglovale is beaten, knifed, and thrown into a lake with stones tied around his waist by Gaheris and Agravaine. They wait until they see the bubbles of air appearing on the surface and then leave, but a fisherman sees what happened and rescues Aglovale just in time. Gaheris and Agravaine are the enemies of Aglovale's family, after Aglovale's father, King Pellinore, killed their father, King Lot; in revenge the sons of Lot killed Pellinore and two of Aglovale's brothers).

Whilst recovering at night, Aglovale learns that Gaheris and Agravaine are lost in the marshes, and will drown unless someone saves them – he laughs, just like he laughed when he saw Sir Berel taken away, and throws out the light that might guide them to safety, but then something inexplicable happens... Housman doesn't give any description for Aglovale's motives; she just describes the following:

Void of strength, in spirit he was utterly ashamed, as overtaken in the practise of treason. With averted head he left the use of his members to them. Their great weight wrung him, his joints started, his wounds gaped and bled at the strain. Body and mind

were in dolorous accord. From his hand to his neck they reached their way in turn; with dreadful embraces they reached their way.

He keeps himself completely anonymous, disguised in ‘a beggarly tabard of sack-cloth’.¹ Much later on, Gaheris finds out that Aglovale was the one who rescued him and his brother.

*“His silence knocks me!” cried Gaheris. “These years of silence—silence under all manner of despite. Face to face he might have spoken and broken us then and there—and he would not. God knows I was never so base but I would have published his worship to my own shame; but silence, silence for ever. His broken face, his useless hand—they do blast and crush the pattern of our knighthood of the Round Table”.*²

By remaining anonymous, Aglovale acts against the worship/shame system. He has also followed Christ’s teaching: in the sermon of the mount, Jesus says ‘*I say unto you, love your enemies and pray for them that persecute you*’.

This seems like quite a simple thing to say. You replace the word ‘hate’ with ‘love’. But it’s not like that at all -- I don’t think Jesus is saying *like* your enemies. He’s not telling us to take them out for pizza and a milkshake. We shouldn’t repress our feelings or pretend the past didn’t happen; but we should nevertheless, despite all that, treat our enemies lovingly.

Aglovale knew that Gaheris killed his father. He knew that he tried to kill him. They are enemies. But Aglovale still acted lovingly towards Gaheris, to his own shame, and going against knightly society, because he knew that he himself was a sinner, and that *he needed help*. Helping Gaheris, though it hurt him physically and mentally, he helped himself; we are all in need of love.

Launcelot, who is called the best knight in the world because he is the best fighter and wins all the tournaments, says to Aglovale:

I envy you. You above all men in the world I envy. Would to God I were such a man as you.

Sometimes there is pressure on us to be like Launcelot, especially this term. But Launcelot is trapped by his reputation as the best knight, but he knows – and so most other people – that he is in love with Guinevere, the wife of King Arthur. Lancelot knows that he is not perfect but everyone pretends that he is because he is so successful. Aglovale knows he is not perfect and everyone knows his sins and treats him accordingly. That is why Lancelot envies him: he is more easily able to confess his sins and repent. *You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.*

Aglovale is a man younger than Lancelot, ‘still in the middle prime of life, [but] with the face of an old man deeply lined and worn; only close black hair kept truth to his years’.

Clemence Housman ends her book with a prayer for Sir Thomas Malory, whose work she based her book on.

We don’t know much about Malory, but most people think he was an ex-soldier from Warwickshire, who died in 1471. This Malory was like Aglovale. He was a thief and a bandit, who stole a woman away, and was unpopular with influential society because of his political opinions.

¹ Housman, *Aglovale*, ch. 15, p. 174.

² Housman, *Aglovale*, ch. 17, p. 282.

Like Aglovale, he has his priorities right. He spends his time in prison writing about King Arthur and his knights. At the end of his book, he doesn't say "pray that I get out of prison" or "I never done it" or ask for people to raise money for his release. Instead he just asks that people pray for him – and this is the brilliant part – not only when he is alive, but when he is dead as well. This means that we can pray for him in 2012 and it will be just as relevant.

To this prayer, which I will end on, we might add a prayer for Clemence Housman as well, and for all writers who have inspired us or guided us, or have helped us follow Christ's teaching. We should also pray for ourselves, that we do not forget our priorities, especially in this term when all seems centred on achieving high grades. That we love each other, even our enemies, because we ourselves are in need of love.

*I pray you all, gentlemen and gentlewomen [...],
pray for me while I am alive,
that God send me good deliverance,
and when I am dead,
I pray you all pray for my soul.*

*For this book was ended the ninth year of the reign of King Edward the Fourth,
by Sir Thomas Maleore, knight,
as Jesus help him
for his great might,
as he is the servant of Jesus
both day and night.*

Amen.