

The Theology of Mouse.

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This paper was written in direct response to a Christmas card received from a friend. Aware of its less than clear seasonal message she challenged me, in less than 2000 words, to find a theology of mouse. In so doing I wish to apologise to any whom I may have inadvertently offended. It is not my wish to trivialise belief or make fun of tradition and neither do I wish to belittle strongly held convictions or the doctrine of the church. This paper is intended to be a little bit of enjoyment and no more than that. I also believe that God created humour.

The Theology of Mouse - The background

This has been a most enjoyable piece of research and well worth the time spent on it. Interest in the development of a theology of mouse has been relatively recent, despite the heritage of chronicles which exist, and few theologians are yet persuaded of its validity. Despite this lack of certainty there is a growing body of opinion supporting this erudition.

To throw some light onto the history of this evolving branch of theology, exploring the cultural framework and consciousness of mouse, one can turn to the Mouse Chronicles. Few of the Mouse Writings survive but the challenge of the early movements of mouse and its hole-istic history has been discovered and passed down to us. Many of the laws of purification and atonement as described in ancient writings are now questioned, recognised as being part of the culture of the time and from which we have now moved away. Unfortunately Mouse has not been so freed.

You shall regard as unclean all four-footed wild animals that go on flat paws – you shall regard these as unclean among animals that teem on the ground. (Lev. 11:27, 28)

Today's people are unsympathetic to the idea of sacrificial offerings and to the throwing of blood. Mouse was not so sacrificed, maybe because of its diminutive stature, but Isaiah tells us that it was commonplace to eat of the animals of the fields:

those who eat of the flesh of pigs and rodents and all vile vermin shall meet their end, one and all. (Isaiah 66:17)

Edible mouse was of course introduced into this country by the Romans, but this practice was not widely followed. It is unlikely to hinder ecumenical conversations. Indeed it was dying out when Chaucer wrote:

*And every deyntee that it is in that house
Swich appetite hath he to ete a mous.*

Tradition

Mouse as a creature of God was brought before Adam for naming. 'Mus Musculus', said Adam, because when he named the species he always used Latin. This naming should – and indeed did – convey status upon Mouse but it was largely lost (and only now is it being recognised in the movement for animal rights).

This small creature has held an enduring place in history. Its tradition is long. Its early records, however, were less illustrious. Horace in the century before the birth of Christ, reported 'Parturient montes nascetur ridiculus mus'. (Mountains will heave in childbirth and a silly little mouse will be born). Despite this many relics and fossilised remains are kept in the buildings allegedly originally named after Mouse, Mus-eums (although with the change in pronunciation over the years the meaning has been lost).

There is a proposition, though vehemently, and I am sure quite rightly, widely discounted by later followers, that Didymus the Blind in the 4th century was of mouse. His works were not, after all, copied in the middle ages and only fragments of writings ascribed to him survive. Briefly, a similar myth arose some centuries later at the end of the 15th century and after his death, around Erasmus Desiderius. This owed much to the title of his work – *In Praise of Folly* and to the fact that both Pope Paul IV and Sixtus V banned his writings – as you will be only too well aware.

It was, of course, from the early crusade of Mouse and its bid for leadership that we received the wise epithet, now usually used of Bishops or even Popes, *Pri-mus inter Pares*.

It has not been possible, incidentally, despite a long held supposition to confirm that Mouse once conveyed its truth through squeaking in metrical psalmody. Many believe it to be fact that *Mus* formed the greater part of the word *Mus-ic* and it was not until later centuries that musical instruments were used and the pronunciation changed to *musical*, when polyphony was introduced in the middle ages.

The Age of Enlightenment, in the 18th century, was particularly traumatic for Mouse with its conviction that truth could only be reached through reason, dissertation and experiment. Mouse of course, was challenged linguistically and found this period very difficult, especially the element of experiment. It was almost catastrophic (a concept initiated by Mouse to describe something very bad).

The Doctrine of Mouse

The Doctrine of Mouse has been difficult historically to separate from that of creation. Some variations in doctrine gave rise to, or arose from, the differing evolutionary perspectives of House Mouse, Field Mouse, Harvest Mouse and Dormouse. (We will not enter here into the scholastic argument surrounding creation and evolution).

The House Mouse lives in Community, often in poverty and overcrowding. There is a degree of criminality, not surprisingly, associated with this level of deprivation. Particularly common is theft of consumables and gnawing and entering into larders. This petty thieving is one of the factors which triggers the ambivalence in the relationship between humanity and Mouse. It makes Mouse an outcast.

It has long been known that Rat frequented ships. The fact that Mouse was also called to cross the seas is not so well known. The evidence, illustrating its sense of community and call to its own to gather together, is found, however, in the term still used – *Mus-ter* stations.

Attention given to the Harvest Mouse and Field Mouse, appreciates the experience and needs of rural areas – isolation, scattered communities, lack of transport, dependence on the weather and seasons. Here again there is the ambivalence, so often noted, between humanity and Mouse. Although Harvest and Field Mouse families are isolated, separated from people, yet they are greatly affected by humanity's ecological practices. Their very lifestyle is threatened.

The Dormouse experiences a similar threat. With its home made from stripped papery bark of honeysuckle, it would imply a life of simplicity. Indeed, it does seek solitude. It is a more meditative, contemplative Mouse. Yet at every season of reaping, as the last straw is gleaned, humanity's greed forces the Mouse from its final environment, out into the stubbled fields – a wilderness experience of immense proportion.

The Spirituality of Mouse

There are many examples of Mouse and *musty-cal* experience, indeed Mouse *musty-cism* has not infrequently been remarked by those with a more sensitive nose. Mouse can often be found in a state of ecstasy when under the influence of profound emotion. It has an appearance of being in a trance, in suspense, apparent paralysis, trembling in its intensity.

The Dormouse has a quiet spirituality. It is not unknown for it to lose itself in an experience of being entirely in something else. House Mouse of course, has a spirituality discerned in the everyday, the busyness of life and, perhaps oddly, this is where its musty-cism is most obvious.

Mouse as Victim

Mouse, naturally, as small and vulnerable, is frequently victim. There is a deep theological truth in power lying in weakness. Mouse is unaware of the relative power which it holds (it frightens, it disturbs, causes panic and hatred, not withstanding its size). Many people are musogynist. Women scream, men kill. You will not be surprised to learn that in the early 1600s retribution followed swiftly after mouse was killed. Braithwaite immortalised this for us when he wrote:

*To Banbury, came I, O profane one!
Where I saw a Puritane one.
hanging of his cat on Monday
for killing of a Mouse on Sunday.*

Now we think nothing of it! Yet the paradox of strength in weakness and Mouse as victim has been illustrated, as have David and Goliath, in parable and fairy tale. The three blind mice, the crooked Mouse caught by the crooked cat, the pie made of mouse, the elephant and the mouse ... one could go on. Only children play happily alongside and accept Mouse. We would do well to remember that unless we become as little children ...

Mouse as outcast through deprivation has been considered previously, but notice should be given to the Orders of Mouse. These deliberately embrace poverty. Indeed you will know the expression 'as poor as a church Mouse', though few realise this derivation. The Church Mouse was later romanticised by a poet Laureate and though these Orders are now extinct, the church Mouse does live on in the craftsmanship of carpenters and wood carvers and furniture makers. Examples can be seen in churches in Allesley in Coventry and in Kilburn in the Yorkshire Dales. It is said that Robert



Thompson was working with fellow craftsman Charlie Barker in the roof of a church. "I and another carver were carving a huge cornice for a screen and he happened to say something about being as poor as a church mouse," Thompson wrote almost 30 years later, in 1949. "I said I'll carve a mouse here." and he did. The development of the image is a direct response to this victimisation of Mouse.

Mouse as offering departs from the idea of Martyrdom as understood by men and women. Mouse rarely, if indeed ever, offers itself. It is seldom a willing victim. The theology of suffering of Mouse has not been developed and would perhaps, merit further attention not only at paw of cat, but as experimental victim for scientific hypothesis. It is difficult to identify the redemptive nature of Mouse as offering unless seen in this light. Mouse, however, has a real sense that 'in life we are in death'. This form of awareness of mortality is very real. The relationship between Mouse and bird such as owl, or between Mouse and animal such a cat, is forged out of avoidance and fear. It is one of hunter and hunter, of oppression. Mouse has no sense of liberation theology.

Mouse has struggled through the ages. It has, as far as is known, no concept of original sin or Metanoia in the sense of turning and repentance, although rapid changes of direction are far from unknown. Mouse is, a priori, living only by faith – no works ever having been observed. That faith is strongly identified with being and an instinct for survival. House Mouse of course implicitly understands Koinonia and has a strong sense of Community.

Conclusion

Incarnational theology brings a belief in God active still in creation, God's will is for the perfection of his creation, the expectation of the kingdom here – but it is not yet. All creation, says the chorus, is straining on tiptoe for to see. Mouse, even on tiptoe, can see little but continues to live as if the moment is its last and yet as if it were going to live for ever - Carpe diem could be its call. It takes no thought for the morrow. It accepts its place and goes forth to be fruitful. Yet, Mouse, these days, is a scattered tribe, indeed often just a remnant, sometimes found left on a doorstep. Its language fails to convey its thinking – yet its place is distinct.

Mussmiology, from Mus - mouse, mission – to send, logos – to study, as a branch of theology, studying the principles and practices of Mouse mission, make a fascinating subject, more important these days with the increased interest in situation ethics. There is, once again, a threat to mouse as the experimentation, particularly into Mus-cular potential, is perpetrated upon it. Mouse has long defended its renunciation of birth control but, as it becomes more and more involved in the field of medical research and genetic engineering, Mouse is wondering whether there is more to the meaning of life than to be used in a laboratory. Is this what it can hope for should it hope? Is a higher meaning never to be known or can there be a recognition of Mouse as Mouse. Mouse believes it must happen.