

Shire Justice

What hobbits can teach us about *Shalom*

Reading Tolkien's Lord of the Rings gives us a picture of another world, near enough to our own for it to inspire us to think again about how we order our lives in the twenty-first century. One ~~such picture~~ is the Shire and its justice.

David McIlroy claims that 'shire justice' is akin to the Biblical idea of shalom, something that every society needs if it is to flourish.

The greatest work of imaginative fiction in the twentieth century begins with a birthday party. Tolkien starts *The Lord of the Rings* in the rural idyll of the Shire, and in the opening pages of *The Fellowship of the Ring* gives us a picture of a community which is in harmony with itself and its environment. But, as the readers soon discover, the peace of this community is threatened by the shadow of Mordor. Four hobbits, Frodo, Sam, Merry and Pippin, set out from the Shire to destroy the Ring of Power. In the penultimate chapter of *The Return of the King*, having accomplished their mission, they return to find the Shire ruined and despoiled by Sharkey (the white wizard Saruman, now stripped of his powers) and his men. Armed with the courage and wisdom which they have learned on their journey, the four hobbits liberate the Shire and restore its rightful order.

Tolkien's fiction did not intend his writings to be an allegory. We are not supposed to be able to draw one-to-one correspondences between the details in his work and aspects of our world. Instead, Tolkien intends to evoke feelings and responses within his readers, to awaken our imaginations so that we discover new possibilities and recover old wisdom that we are in danger of losing.¹ What Tolkien shows us in his descriptions of the Shire at the beginning and end of *The Lord of the Rings* is what a just community could look like, how it could be corrupted, and how it might be restored. He asks us to dare to imagine "Shire Justice".

The Shape of Shire Justice

Tolkien feeds our imagination with a description of the Shire in the Prologue to *The Lord of the Rings*.

The Shire at this time had hardly any “government”. Families for the most part managed their own affairs. Growing food and eating it occupied most of their time. In other matters they were, as a rule, generous and not greedy, but contented and moderate, so that estates, farms, workshops, and small trades tended to remain unchanged for generations. ... The only real official in the Shire at this date was the Mayor of Michel Delving ... [and] almost his own duty was to preside at banquets, given on the Shire-holidays, which occurred at frequent intervals.

The only government services run by the Mayor are the Messenger Service and the Watch. The Watch was made up of Shirriffs, who were the closest thing the Hobbits had to a police force, but Tolkien describes them as

in practice rather haywards than policemen, more concerned with the strayings of beasts than of people. There were in all the Shire only twelve of them, three in each Farthing, for Inside Work. A rather larger body, varying at need was employed ... to see that Outsiders of any kind, great or small, did not make themselves a nuisance.²

There was one other official post in the Shire: the Thain. The Thain had the power to call a shire-moot in times of emergency. The shire-moot was a *parlement*, a general assembly of the hobbits to decide what to do in response to a threat. The shire-moot could call for a shire-muster, it could summon all the hobbits to unite in defence of their land. The Shire is therefore a ‘yeoman republic’,³ in which strong extended families live prosperously but modestly in accordance with common values.

Particular social conditions in the Shire make such limited government a possibility. Christian theologians, from Thomas Aquinas to Oliver O’Donovan, have long taught that the virtue of the citizens is the most important factor in a polity.⁴ The functions the government of the Shire is called upon to perform are minimal both because family bonds among the hobbits are strong and because its people are law-abiding, co-operative and generous. The hobbits live in large families, sometimes in extended family groups, and always with a keen sense of their place in the network of relationships in their family and clan.⁵ It is in these family groups that the values of the hobbits are taught and hobbits learn how to relate rightly to one another.

The hobbits need no police force because their general disposition is to act justly towards one another. Tolkien tells us that ‘usually they kept the laws of free will, because they were The Rules (as they said), both ancient and just.’⁶ In the Shire, the Hobbits are typically law-abiding, because they own their own laws. They have judged for themselves that their laws are both representative of the community’s tradition (ancient) and right and fair (just).⁷ Given the virtue of Hobbit society, which is at peace with itself, a strong police force is redundant.

There is a ‘radical nostalgia’⁸ to Tolkien’s description of the Shire. It calls to mind a vision of a society ‘in which men and women feel at home with themselves, with each other and with nature, a world in which harmony reigns.’⁹ By this means he creates images of how things ‘ought to be’, and perhaps, how they once were. But the Shire is not Eden. Some of its inhabitants, and in particular the Sackville-Bagginses and Ted Sandyman, display the objectionable qualities and the petty attempts at superiority which can characterise close-knit communities.

In many respects, the Shire represents an idealised version of a mediaeval English village, governed by a common law in harmony with the customs of the people, bonded together by frequent festivals, and in need only of protection against external enemies. More than one commentator has suggested that it is modelled on Warwickshire or Worcestershire,¹⁰ or possibly even Herefordshire.¹¹ Given that J.R.R. Tolkien was Professor of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic at Oxford University, there may well be elements drawn from a vision of a Saxon village before the Norman Conquest.¹²

There is, however, another intriguing analogy to be drawn. The book of Deuteronomy offers an account of a harmonious, agrarian, egalitarian society, whose people live in spontaneous obedience to their laws, enjoy frequent festivals, and live in close-knit communities built around strong family ties. In the Shire, Tolkien offers us an imaginative picture of what ancient Israel could have been like, if only its people had lived justly.

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The key to Deuteronomy’s social vision is the idea of *shalom*. *Shalom* is an idea which encapsulates order, justice and peace. In Isaiah’s vision of *shalom*, the community of *shalom* is a place of peace, security and undisturbed rest (Isaiah 32:16-18). It is ‘not simply the absence of hostilities’, but ‘true harmony, that is, people living together in the right order that

God intended'.¹³ Where there is *shalom*, society is rightly ordered, everyone enjoys what is justly theirs, and peace reigns because personal relationships are good. *Shalom* is given its shape by the laws set out in Deuteronomy (which means in Greek, 'second law'). *Shalom* is a goal which is pursued by actions which are just (*tsedeqah*) and by just judgments (*mishpatim*).

There are three secrets to *shalom*. The first is that *shalom* is built around good relationships between people. The second is that *shalom* requires an intimate understanding of what God wants. The third is that *shalom* demands that no-one is excluded from participating in society.

The first secret of *shalom* is that *shalom* is built around good relationships. *Shalom* is a state of affairs that exists between people. Just actions and just judgments promote and restore right relationships within the community. Deuteronomy is clear that material security and prosperity is the result of right relationships and not vice versa. In Micah's vision of the Day of the Lord, when swords are beaten into ploughshares, "Every man will sit under his own vine and under his own fig tree, and no one will make them afraid" (Micah 4:4; see also Isaiah 65:21). In the Shire, it is eating together and exchanging presents which sustain good relationships.

The second secret of *shalom* is having an intimate understanding of what God requires. Deuteronomy urges the Israelites to know God's rules intimately. They are to take them to heart, to teach them to their children, to think and talk about them at home and in the streets, in the morning and at night-time (Deuteronomy 6:6-9). Justice involves everyone in the community. Each community in a particular location and each household within that community should know for itself how to behave justly towards its neighbours, meaning that law-enforcement would be a last resort. Like the Rules which the hobbits followed, Deuteronomy's laws were supposed to be a way of life for the Jews.

The third secret of *shalom* is that no-one is excluded from participating as a dignified member of society. *Shalom* does not necessarily demand total equality, but it does require that each person and family has enough access to basic resources such as land, money and education, so that they can contribute to and receive from others without feeling ashamed.¹⁴ We see this in the Shire. Sam is the gardener for Bilbo and Frodo but his family own their own house, 'Number 3 Bagshot Row just below Bag End'.¹⁵ The difference in social status between the two is not so vast as to prevent Sam and Frodo from sustaining a reciprocal friendship in which both give and receive to the other.

Deuteronomy's laws are designed to prevent the creation of a permanent under-class. Each family was given its allotment of land and that

allotment of land could not be sold permanently. Once every 50 years, the Jubilee legislation provided that land which had been leased had to be returned to its original owners. The idea was that each family group should have a relatively equal share of the land, and even if one group prospered and another struggled, no-one should be trapped in intergenerational poverty with no hope of social mobility. Up until the time of *The Lord of the Rings*, the Shire had no call for such legislation because each hobbit family held no more land than they needed and no family sought to acquire an inordinately large estate.

The Shire is a place of *shalom* because it is ‘well-ordered’ and because the hobbits act justly towards one another.¹⁶ The *shalom* which the hobbits enjoy is the consequence of the virtues which they display, the virtues of enjoyment, contentment and hospitality.

Enjoyment of Things without Enslavement to Things



The hobbits love good beer and smoking pipe-weed. They enjoy eating, six meals a day if possible. They will find any excuse for a party, and for giving and receiving presents. These, their chief pleasures, are communal rather than solitary activities. The things which they enjoy bring them together as a community rather than dividing them and isolating them.

When Tolkien says that the hobbits spend most of their time growing and eating food it is easy to think of them as being just like us, workaholic consumers. However, the hobbits have learned the habit of enjoying things without being enslaved by them. Their consumption is moderated by their generosity. They have learned not just to consume things but also to give them away. Their frequent festivals show that they prioritise community over profit. They know that things are given to us to be looked after and to be shared with others. The hobbits find delight in simple pleasures—or, to put it more accurately, they have never lost that child-like ability to revel in the gifts of ordinary life.¹⁷

Tolkien gives us the secret of being able to enjoy things without being enslaved to them. The hobbits were ‘so unwearyingly fond of good things not least because they could, when put to it, do without them’.¹⁸

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The hobbits show us that depending on God, the great giver, protects us from becoming possessed by our possessions, and enables us to delight again and again in the gifts which God gives.

How do we tell whether we are able to enjoy things without being enslaved by them? We tell by whether we are able to let go of them if necessary. Of the four hobbits who leave the Shire, Pippin and Merry are the ones who are most obsessed with food, forever thinking about breakfast, second breakfast, or another meal.¹⁹ Through their experiences in Rohan and Gondor respectively they learn what it is to focus on the well-being of a wider community rather than their own comforts. Frodo and Sam take a different journey. On their way to Mordor, bit by bit, all the things to which they were attached are stripped away from them. In the end, even the orc-gear and weapons, which they were using to disguise and protect themselves, have to be thrown away. Like Job, they end up losing all their material protections. At this point, the readers see that relationships matter more than possessions, as Sam carries Frodo up Mount Doom.²⁰ It is only when people are put first that things can be rightly enjoyed.

Contentment

The social stability of the Shire is the sign that its people are content. They are at peace with one another, with themselves, and with their environment. The Shire is contrasted with the Wild. Nature has been domesticated but not destroyed, it is cultivated not exploited.

Like chastity, contentment is a virtue which our age defies. Our economic system requires that we constantly consume more, that we chase endlessly after new gadgets or experiences which we must discard tomorrow or come to recognise as ‘so last year’. The hobbits, by contrast, are enabled to maintain a harmonious, fraternal social order because each individual and family recognises when they have got enough, and that is why ‘estates, farms, workshops, and small trades tended to remain unchanged for generations’.²¹

It is because Sam has been formed in a culture which has taught him to be content that he is able to resist the temptation of the Ring in Cirith Ungol. The Ring presents Sam with a vision of ‘Samwise the Strong, Hero of the Age, striding with a flaming sword across the darkened land, and armies flocking to his call as he marched to the overthrow of Barad-dûr.’²² Sam is able to see through this mirage. He overcomes the temptation because of his love for Frodo and also because of what Tolkien calls

his plain hobbit-sense: he knew in the core of his heart that he was not large enough to bear such a burden, even if such visions were not a mere cheat to betray him. The one small garden of a free gardener was all his need and due, not a garden swollen to a realm; his own hands to use, not the hands of others to command.²³

Sam rejects the allure of power because he knows that he will be content to be a free gardener tending a small garden. He has no inflated sense of his own self-worth, no artificial idea of his own needs, and no exaggerated claim about his own rights. We need to learn from Sam how to reject the advertiser's claims that we need more or newer things to vindicate our worth. In our overcrowded, overworked, overheating planet we urgently need to discover the virtue of voluntary simplicity²⁴ and the self-discipline to renounce the destructive attempt to 'keep up with the Joneses'.

Hospitality

The hospitality of the hobbits is shown in their free gifts of presents. At birthday parties, the custom of the hobbits is that the person whose birthday it is gives presents rather than receiving them.²⁵ This custom encourages the hobbits to be constantly generous. Bilbo is the ideal example of this. His eleventy-first birthday party is open to everyone.²⁶

Although Bilbo's adventures to the Lone Mountain had made him wealthy, he was 'generous with his money'. His home was open to all of his relatives (with the significant exception of the Sackville-Bagginses who constantly coveted Bag End) and also to hobbits from 'poor and unimportant families'.²⁷ Most significantly of all, for the purposes of the story, after Frodo's parents drown in a boating accident, Bilbo adopts his nephew as his heir and raises him.²⁸ Bilbo's actions show us what it means to follow the God who puts the lonely into families (Psalm 68:6). Shire hospitality is far more than throwing the occasional dinner party. It is a lifestyle which involves opening our homes to the homeless, the friendless and those cut off from their relations. Bilbo's hospitality to Frodo proves to be an enormous blessing to them both, to the Shire, and to the whole of Middle-Earth.

The three hobbit virtues are essential to Shire Justice. Such justice has the shape of a virtuous circle: enjoyment leads to contentment which leads to hospitality which leads to enjoyment.

Threats to Shire Justice

Although the great enemy in *The Lord of the Rings* is Sauron, Tolkien shows how the threats to Shire Justice arise in the hearts of the hobbits themselves. They are the tendency to insularity, the temptation of avarice and the lust for power which results in tyranny.

Insularity

One of the chief dangers which the hobbits face is that of turning their backs on the wider world.²⁹ Having created such a cosy, homely, community, there is the constant temptation to insulate it against the disruptions and interruptions of the world outside. It is all too easy to retreat into the gated community or to close the front door and to refuse to interact with those who are different from us, those who have problems, those whose behaviour will challenge our prejudices and our way of doing things.

This is a danger which two of Tolkien's best-loved characters have to wrestle with. For Bilbo, the temptation to reject or to resent the outsider is illustrated at the beginning of *The Hobbit*. His tranquillity in Bag End is disrupted as dwarf after dwarf knocks on the door, expecting entry. As Bilbo scurries to and fro, getting more tea and beer and cakes for the dwarfs, he becomes increasingly resentful. The limitations of Bilbo's willingness to show hospitality are exposed. He is challenged about whether his door is open to all who seek refreshment or just to other hobbits. In the final scene of the book we are shown that Bilbo has learned his lesson. When Gandalf and Balin pay him a visit, they find a Bilbo who no longer worries about whether his guests will eat him out of house and home but who is happy to share his possessions. The very last words of the book have Bilbo laughing and passing the tobacco jar to Gandalf so that they can enjoy the companionship of a good smoke together.³⁰

For Sam, the issue is not practical but intellectual. At the beginning of *The Lord of the Rings*, Sam's thinking is entirely parochial in nature. He cannot imagine 'thinking outside the box'. He has no conception that folk outside the Shire could see things differently and that he might be enriched by their perspectives. But when Sam is in Lothlórien, he starts to understand the world-view of the Elves.³¹ The way in which Sam's horizons have been enlarged is embodied in the name given to his daughter, born just before the end of *The Lord of the Rings*. She is called Elanor, after a yellow winter flower which Sam had seen in Lothlórien.³²

Like the Shire, Deuteronomy's vision of social harmony is built around strong extended family groups. In such a society, those who are marginalised are those without close family relations. Time and again, Deuteronomy and other passages in the Hebrew Scriptures emphasise the importance of including the widow, the orphan and the foreigner within the blessings of *shalom* (Deuteronomy 27:19; Exodus 22:21-23). In our world today, widows, orphans, refugees and minority groups remain amongst the most vulnerable. In *The Lord of the Rings*, we see Bilbo demonstrating

Shire Justice to the orphan (by adopting Frodo) and to the foreigners (by hosting the dwarfs). As we will consider later, Frodo shows mercy to the widow (in his dealings with Lobelia Sackville-Baggins). Shire Justice includes within a community those who have been ignored by it, shunned, or excluded from it.

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Avarice

The second threat to the *shalom* of the Shire is avarice. The most dramatic illustration of this is Sméagol-Gollum, a hobbit who has been totally corrupted by the Ring. Sméagol allows his desire to possess the Ring to overpower his friendship with his cousin Déagol. Avarice leads him to murder Déagol and isolates him from all other hobbits. Sméagol loses everything in his obsession with the Ring. He abandons the world of daylight for damp, dark caves. He becomes unable to enjoy cooked food, preferring the taste of raw fish. In the end, he loses his own identity, as Sméagol is replaced by Gollum. The Latin word for avarice is *cupiditas*. It is a distorted form of love, a disordered, disproportionate attachment to something. The result, for Gollum, is that Gollum ends up not possessing the Ring but becoming enslaved by it. Tolkien's message to us is that greed is an addiction.³³ Gollum stands as a solemn warning of what happens to a person when they cannot hold lightly to those gifts and things which they have been given but instead ascribe ultimate value to them.

The destructive power of avarice is also what leads to the ruin of the Shire. Bilbo's house at Bag End is coveted by his cousin Otho Sackville-Baggins and Otho's wife, Lobelia. The acquisitiveness of the Sackville-Bagginses is highlighted at the end of *The Hobbit*. Bilbo returns home to discover that he has been presumed dead, that all his furniture is being auctioned off, and that the Sackville-Bagginses are already measuring up his rooms to see if their furniture will fit. Tolkien tells us that they never did give Bilbo back all of his silver spoons.³⁴

In *The Lord of the Rings*, we find that Otho and Lobelia's greed has been inherited by their only son, Lotho. His greed did not stop at the acquisition of Bag End, which Lobelia buys from Frodo before he leaves on his adventures.³⁵ Farmer Cotton tells the returning party that it seemed that Lotho

wanted to own everything himself, and then order other folk about. It soon came out that he already did own a sight more than was good

for him; and he was always grabbing more, though where he got the money was a mystery: mills and malt-houses and inns, and farms, and leaf-plantations.³⁶

The key commentary on Lotho's actions is that he owned 'a sight more than was good for him.' Tolkien is making an important point here. Not only is Lotho's greed bad for his neighbours, who are disempowered and disinherited as he expands his portfolio of land, it is also bad for Lotho's soul.

Although Tolkien does not labour the point, it is Lotho's greed which invites Sharkey's interference in the Shire. Lotho's speculations in land are financed on borrowed money, money lent by Sharkey. To repay the interest on his loans, Lotho has to start sending away pipe-leaf and other goods. In the end, Sharkey demands an account. Like bailiffs, his ruffians come into the Shire with their 'great wagons, some to carry off the goods south-away, and others to stay.' Lotho discovers that a borrower is a slave to the lender (Proverbs 22:7). Although Lotho's hard-bought position enables him to become 'The Chief', he soon discovers that the true power lies with Sharkey's ruffians. He is nothing more than a puppet ruler.

Like Gollum, Lotho ultimately falls prey to his own greed. Whereas Gollum ends up destroying himself and the Ring in Mount Doom, Lotho meets an ignominious end, imprisoned in Bag End, the house which his parents had coveted for so long, and murdered there in his sleep by Sharkey's lieutenant, Wormtongue.³⁷

Tyranny

In Farmer Cotton's explanation of what has happened to the Shire he identifies two motivations of Lotho which have had disastrous consequences. We have already looked at one, Lotho's avarice, his desire to 'own everything himself'. The other is Lotho's lust for power, his wish to 'order other folk about'. The result is tyranny, as Lotho first becomes Chief Shirriff, then usurps power by deposing the Mayor, Will Whitfoot. As 'the Chief', Lotho behaves as if he owns the place, seizing whatever he desires, making endless lists of new rules and pushing people about through his shirriffs and ruffians.³⁸ He treats his fellow hobbits as being of no account, overriding their rights and imprisoning anyone who attempts to stand up to him.³⁹

Lotho was corrupted by the same lust for power which had corrupted Sauron. In one of his letters, Tolkien describes how Sauron had begun by thinking that he knew better than all others how to organise the world,

and ended by forging a Ruling Ring, which would rule and bind others.⁴⁰ The lust for power results in tyranny, the lawless use of power for its own sake. In forging the Ring, Sauron was following in the footsteps of his master Melkor, who in *The Silmarillion* rebels against Eru because ‘he wished himself to have subjects and servants, and to be called Lord, and to be a master over other wills.’⁴¹ The Ring gives Sauron ‘the power to dominate other wills.’⁴²

This is exactly the opposite of Tolkien’s Christian understanding of power as service. The contrast between tyranny and service is revealed in the careers of the two wizards, Saruman and Gandalf. Saruman’s desire for power leads to his alliance with Sauron and to his expulsion from the order of wizards. Gandalf, by contrast, never dominates but always facilitates. Whereas Saruman builds a fortress at Isengard and gathers an army of orcs, Gandalf travels among the free peoples, encouraging and equipping others for leadership.⁴³

Tolkien’s antidote to tyranny is to distribute power to the lowest reasonable level. Stratford Caldecott sees Tolkien’s social philosophy as part of ‘a tradition of Catholic social thought known as “Distributism”, whose most eloquent exponents in the previous generation were Hilaire Belloc and Gilbert Keith Chesterton.’⁴⁴

Tolkien’s antidote to tyranny is to distribute power to the lowest reasonable level.

Distributists saw the family as the only solid basis for civil society and of any sustainable civilisation. They believed in a society of households, and were suspicious of top-down government. Power, they held, should be devolved to the lowest level compatible with a reasonable degree of order (the principle of “subsidiarity”). Social order flows from the natural bonds of friendship, co-operation and family loyalty, within the context of a local culture possessing a strong sense of right and wrong. It cannot be imposed by force, and indeed force should never be employed except as a last resort and in self-defence.⁴⁵

The key to distributism is that power is distributed and that local community is valued. It involves principles of subsidiarity and sphere sovereignty,⁴⁶ which distribute power between different levels and organisations within society. It is a social vision of what Tolkien called in one of his letters ‘moderated freedom with consent.’⁴⁷

Distributing power does not, however, entirely dissolve the lust for power. The tyranny of Lotho and Sharkey in the Shire is still dangerous, even if it is not on the scale of Sauron’s threat to Middle-Earth. An

important part of the message of *The Lord of the Rings* is that the Ruling Ring is able to corrupt both the important and powerful on the one hand, as well as the small and powerless on the other. Throughout the book, Tolkien describes how, through carrying the Ruling Ring, Frodo battles with constant temptation to let it wield him rather than *vice versa*. Frodo fails at the last. When he arrives at the Crack of Doom, he finds himself unable to relinquish the Ring. Only when Gollum bites off his finger is he free of it.

Restoring Shire Justice

Frodo, Sam, Merry and Pippin return to a Shire which is unrecognisable from the one which they left. The pubs have all been closed. There are food shortages because the harvest is now confiscated by the ‘gatherers’ and only a small proportion of it re-distributed by the ‘sharers’.⁴⁸ Law is no longer an instrument of justice which embodies the best values of the community; it is now an ever-growing list of rules which are used to oppress them.⁴⁹ Both the architecture and the landscape reflect the inversion in the Shire’s values. The old mills and farm-houses have been knocked down and replaced with ugly, purely functional, industrial units and hovels. The trees have been cut down and the gardens left untended.⁵⁰

In ‘The Scouring of the Shire’, Tolkien shows how the *shalom* of the Shire is restored once again. Three features are especially significant in this account: restraint, restoration and repentance.

Restraint

The first thing which has to be done by the four returning hobbits is to deal with the ruffians who are terrorising the population.

Frodo’s response is the model of restraint. He makes it clear that:

there is to be no slaying of hobbits, not even if they have gone over to the other side. Really gone over, I mean; not just obeying ruffians’ orders because they are frightened. No hobbit has ever killed another on purpose in the Shire, and it is not to begin now. And nobody is to be killed at all, if it can be helped. Keep your tempers and hold your hands to the last possible moment!⁵¹

Shire Justice is remarkably restrained. Frodo has learnt that it must be applied not only to hobbits but even to those who have invaded their land. As they are preparing for the battle of Bywater, he makes it clear to everyone within ear-shot that there is to be ‘no killing, not even of the ruffians, unless it must be done, to prevent them from hurting hobbits.’⁵²

When Saruman is cornered at Bag End, the hobbits from the villages call for him to be killed as a villain and a murderer. Frodo replies: 'I will not have him slain. It is useless to meet revenge with revenge: it will heal nothing.'⁵³ Shire Justice does not condone wrongdoing. It is not morally indifferent. But it does recognise that revenge leads only to a vicious cycle of killing and it seeks to break that cycle through the power of mercy.⁵⁴

If the ruffians' behaviour has all the hallmarks of police brutality, shire justice, by contrast, uses the minimum force necessary to restore order and *shalom*. In the battle of Bywater, Frodo does not fight but intervenes to prevent angry hobbits from killing those enemies who have dropped their weapons.⁵⁵ Shire justice makes possible the reconciliation of those who have laid down their weapons. Nonetheless, shire justice must deal with those who will not be reconciled. Evil must be opposed and banished from the Shire.

The returning hobbits also show us that Shire Justice involves self-restraint. Once the ruffians have been defeated, Frodo, Sam, Merry and Pippin release from the Lockholes all who had been imprisoned. All the prisoners have been ill-treated. Amongst them is the Mayor, Old Will Whitfoot. He is too ill to resume his duties immediately and so Frodo steps in as Deputy Mayor. If Frodo were intent on seizing power, the situation presents an ideal opportunity. In many a fairy story, Frodo would have returned to the Shire and become its king. That is not the way in which *The Lord of the Rings* ends. Instead, we are told that Frodo's only action as Deputy Mayor is 'to reduce the Shirriffs to their proper functions and numbers',⁵⁶ thereby restoring the right ordering of the Shire.

It is Sam who will, one day, be elected as Mayor. But there is no suggestion in *The Lord of the Rings* that Sam will usher in a 'new world order'. We know that Sam will not misuse his power as Mayor because he has already resisted the vision of what it would be like to wield power when he put on the Ring outside Shelob's Lair. Sam will not seek to exploit his status as a hero to overturn the egalitarian character of the Shire. Instead, Sam will use his position, his experience, and his gifts to serve. The very last words in *The Lord of the Rings* are Sam's. He does not use them to announce a vast programme for social improvement. Instead, he simply says: 'I'm back', signalling to us and to his wife, Rosie, that the *shalom* of the Shire has been restored. Whereas the Shire was ruined by Lotho's avarice and lust for power, it will be restored under Sam's empowering stewardship.

Restoration

‘The Scouring of the Shire’ is not something done by Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin *to* their fellow hobbits, it is something done by them *with* their fellow hobbits. Their restoration of the Shire involves three things: a restoration of hope, a restoration of empowerment, and a restoration of the land.

The Chief rules by fear. The number of shirriiffs has increased dramatically. Ruffians from outside the Shire have been hired to intimidate the local population.⁵⁷ The Shire has become a police state. The number of laws have multiplied; all sorts of things have been forbidden. The possibility of arrest or worse has paralysed the hobbits in the same way that the Capitol uses the Peace-Keepers and the Hunger Games to subdue the Districts in Suzanne Collins’s dystopian fantasy.⁵⁸

The four hobbits restore hope through open acts of defiance. Just as Christ used the symbolic power of overturning the tables of the money-changers in the Temple, so the returning party climb over the gate at the Brandywine Bridge,⁵⁹ refuse to co-operate with the shirriiffs who arrest them at Frogmorton,⁶⁰ and rout the ruffians at Bywater.⁶¹ These actions show that things could be different.

Fear paralyses. People resign themselves to their situation and adopt coping strategies. Their oppression becomes normalised. Shire Justice empowers. Merry mobilises the hobbits by blowing the Horn of Rohan.⁶² He calls a shire-muster and reveals the truth that no regime is strong enough to retain power against a united uprising of its citizens. Shire Justice inspires. Without being told to, the hobbits mustering at Bywater light a fire, in defiance of the Chief’s Rules.⁶³ Farmer Cotton joins Merry in organising the popular resistance which traps the first group of ruffians sent to break it.

The third restoration is the restoration of the land. Sharkey has ruined the Shire, first by cutting down its trees and tearing down its beautiful buildings in order to construct utilitarian factories and mills but, then, once that was done, purely for the sake of it.⁶⁴ The Shire is poisoned in a deliberate act of Sharkey’s malice.⁶⁵

In the midst of this devastation, Sam remembers that he has been given some grey dust by the elves. Merry suggests that Sam should choose one spot as a nursery and use it all there. No doubt if he had done so the nursery would have been beautiful. But Sam chooses not to do so. He thinks first of the community, saying: ‘But I’m sure the Lady would not like me to keep

it all for my own garden, now so many folk have suffered'.⁶⁶ Everywhere that he plants new trees to replace those which have been destroyed, he places a grain of the dust. Sam does not tend exclusively to his own affairs; he actively seeks to restore the land as a whole. His actions exemplify what Ralph C. Wood calls the 'self-giving communality' which is the essence of Shire Justice.⁶⁷ The fruit of Sam's generosity of spirit is the prosperity of 1420, a year when the weather was perfect, the children born were all beautiful and strong, the harvest was plentiful, the beer had the best taste ever and everyone enjoyed good health.⁶⁸

The 'self-giving communality' is the essence of Shire Justice.

Repentance

The final thing which is needed to restore Shire Justice is repentance. The restraint shown by Frodo makes it possible for the shirriff to lay down their badges and to re-integrate into the community. Frodo also sees even Lotho as someone who should be given the opportunity to repent. He perceives that Lotho has become a prisoner of the new regime, just like everyone else. He sees it as the moral duty of those who have returned to try to rescue him,⁶⁹ even though it was Lotho's actions which paved the way for the Shire's ruin.

However, Lotho is already dead. What repentance looks like is, instead, revealed in the figure of Lotho's mother, Lobelia. Lobelia, who had spent her entire life climbing the social ladder, fell foul of Sharkey's men when she failed to realise that Sharkey had the real power, even over Bag End.⁷⁰ The final chapter of *The Lord of the Rings* begins with her release from the Lockholes. When she is released, she is cheered and clapped, and welcomed back into the community. Her restoration is confirmed by the fact that she gives Bag End back to Frodo and when she died, 'Frodo was surprised and much moved: she had left all that remained of her money and of Lotho's for him to use in helping hobbits made homeless by the troubles. So that feud was ended.'⁷¹

Lobelia's actions show how repentance is integral to reconciliation. The enmity between the Sackville-Bagginses and the Bagginses of Bag End is brought to an end by her actions which make clear the changes which have taken place in her heart. In leaving her wealth to be used to assist those who were harmed by the actions of her son and of Sharkey's ruffians, Lobelia's actions echo those of Zacchaeus. Her actions after her

release acknowledge her part in the wrongs which have occurred and her willingness to do what she can to help put them right.

Conclusions

Shire Justice is an inspiring vision of what community life could be like. It is a community of *shalom* where relationships are good, where people live in accordance with an intimate, and shared, understanding of right and wrong, and where no-one is excluded. It is a community which combats the temptation of insularity with the virtue of hospitality, the allurements of avarice with the virtue of contentment, and the tyrannous lust for power with an emphasis on the enjoyment of community. When disorder and injustice occurs, the minimal force necessary is used to restore order and *shalom*, and wrongdoers are invited to repent and be reconciled to those they have oppressed. It is a community where hope is constantly being reinvigorated, where empowerment is continually being encouraged, and where the land is continuously being restored and tended.

However, such a vision seems to be so far from our existence in this unjust world. The difficult question for readers of Tolkien is: How is the virtuous community which Tolkien depicts in the Shire to be fostered and nurtured under contemporary conditions?

Shire Justice begins with a proper attention to our own selves.

Shire Justice begins with a proper attention to our own selves. We need to work at becoming 'the kind of selves we need to be in order to live in harmony with others'.⁷² We

need to adopt the disciplines of fasting and feasting, of giving and receiving, of contentment and hospitality, which cultivate the hobbit virtues of Shire Justice.

Shire Justice perseveres in the knowledge that God's greatest work has always been done away from the spotlight of history. Sauron discovered that his power was undone not on the battlefield before the Black Gate before the massed armies of the West, but through the quiet, unseen work of two insignificant hobbits. In our world too, Shire Justice will be achieved through the lives of many unsung Frodos and Sams whose quiet pilgrimages are full of the just actions and just judgments which build *shalom*.

Finally, Shire Justice is realistic about the potential cost. For some, restoring the Shire may result in the earthly happiness enjoyed by Sam, Merry and Pippin. But for others, it may cost them their reputation, their


health and even their lives. The just sharing of Shire Justice will only be brought about through people who are prepared to make sacrifices. That is why Shire Justice is a work for those who, like Frodo, know that even if Shire Justice eludes us in this life-time, there is a place of perfect *shalom*, where there are no more tears, there is everlasting peace, never-ending justice, and undisturbed rest, and that one day a ship will sail out of the Grey Havens to take us there.

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Notes

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