

Lent Preacher 4: Rt Revd Ian Brackley Retired Bishop of Dorking

13th March 2016, Ref Philippians 3: 4b-14, John 12:1-8 (Lent 5, Year C)

God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength (I Cor 1: 25)

Some of you may have come across a book written in the 1960s called "Small is Beautiful". Its author, Ernst Schumacher, was hailed as a prophet who had wise things to say to our society about our priorities, our technological advances and how they actually affected people and the quality of life. Schumacher wrote, "*We are far too clever to be able to survive without wisdom. Knowledge without wisdom can lead to disaster*"

There is no lack of cleverness in our world but is there wisdom? We are aware of many countries in the world enslaved in debt owed to the rich first world and to those seemingly amoral multinational conglomerates. We recently had Fair Trade fortnight, yet the complexities of modern economics can mean that just buying Fair Trade does not remove the middle man who rakes off even more from Fair Trade producers than he is able to from the large conglomerates with their financial muscle. We have the ability and resources to produce enough food to feed the world, yet we are constantly assaulted with stories of mass malnourishment and disease in so many places. The cost of our annual spending on defence in the Western world could feed the starving world twice over. We rightly tend to hesitate about people who claim to know the truth, because their conviction seems so often to lead to oppression, violence and intimidation of others. We experience our society to have considerable doubt about the value of lasting relationships, whether in the commitment of employers to their workforce, or in our personal relationships. Is this a world where there is wisdom? Schumacher commented back then, "*Man closed the gates of Heaven against himself and tried, with immense energy and ingenuity to confine himself to earth. He is now discovering that the Earth is but a transitory state so that a refusal to reach for Heaven means an involuntary descent into Hell. It is not possible to live without religion: the modern experiment to live without religion has failed.*"

Lent is a time for us to look at priorities, in our own lives, yes, but also as a body, the Church, both in its local and diocesan communities and as a national institution, can assess its priorities and ask whether its gospel message of the knowledge and wisdom of Christ is making an impact. Are we fulfilling our prophetic role to proclaim the truth as we see and experience it in Christ to the world? The world means that wider world we encounter day by day in our work, whenever we listen to the news or read a newspaper; it means our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world. God's world. Let's not forget it is God's world. And the wisdom of today's world still finds it nigh impossible to grasp God's wisdom in Christ. For Lent has now brought us in a week to the threshold of Holy Week and the Passion; the rehearsal of that story will surely

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confront the cleverness and so-called wisdom of the world. The truth which is revealed through the life of Christ and most especially in his suffering, death and resurrection offers the profoundest of challenges to the values of the world and to us as followers of Christ, who are inevitably assimilated into the way the world appears to run. A former Bishop of Durham, David Jenkins, summed up in a memorable way what it is that Christ brings to our understanding of God: *“God is as he is in Jesus and therefore we have hope”*. We have hope because the understanding of truth is the understanding of commitment to love; and commitment to that love is commitment to the kind of truth whose force is the renunciation of all hatred, of all forcing upon another, of what the world calls success or power. It is the kind of force for truth practised by people like Gandhi, or Nelson Mandela, or Oscar Romero (the El Salvadorian archbishop assassinated for his championing of the poor). It is perhaps the kind of force for truth that must become even more evident in Syria and Iraq or in Palestine/Israel.

“The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God”, says St Paul.

It seems to me that as we now approach this Holy Week, God is saying to us through Jesus on the Cross at least these three things:-

Firstly, the Love of God shown on the Cross is the Power of Powerlessness. This is something the world and indeed the Church finds it difficult to understand. It will always prove a stumbling block because it seems to run counter to the way things are viewed in the world, a world in which as Christians we are intimately involved, so that we too find it hard to grasp the impact of Christ upon us. We live in a part of the country, where the economy continues to do pretty well, where there are no doubt successful but often highly stressed people. We naturally tend to judge success by worldly standards. We admire people who have “got on” and made a success of their business and have an enviable life style. We believe in market forces, which mean the power of competition. Some would even apply this to their own church: a successful church is a filled church attracting worshippers from all over, marketing a product which seems to satisfy. But to stand for the power of love, to rejoice in weakness or powerlessness, to place oneself with the outsider and the minority rather than with the successful majority will seem divisive and foolish. What effect does the power of this love of Christ that we proclaim really have on our lives? Do we find ourselves in conflict with the standards of the world around us, and if not, why not? The power of powerlessness.

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The second thing that God is saying through the cross is that you cannot compel truth. You can only live and suffer truth. The great Orthodox philosopher and writer, Nicholas Berdyaev, wrote as follows: *“Truth nailed upon the Cross compels nobody, oppresses no one ... its appeal is addressed to free spirits: every time in history that man has tried to turn crucified truth into coercive truth he betrays the fundamental principles of Christ”*. This is something that our world and even the religious world finds difficult. We don't seem to lack those who cry *“This is the truth - my truth is THE truth”*.

Trump that! Extremist politicians of left and right have done it, fundamentalist groups in many world faiths – not least the multiplicity of oddball sub Christian groups around – have proclaimed it. John Habgood, when he was Archbishop of York, once said *“The people who worry me in life are not the uncertain but the too certain”*. Some of you may be familiar with the writings of the Lebanese poet Khalil Gibran, especially his poetic work *“The Prophet”*. Gibran writes, *“Say not ‘I have found the truth’ but rather ‘I have found a truth’.*” On the Cross Christ is saying to us: *“I do not compel you with truth; I do not force upon you my love; I do not expect that love to escape pain and suffering. I simply ask you to see in me upon the Cross, what is meant by the love of God, and to take your hope and confidence from it.”* The Cross once and for all illustrates that life is through death and not by the avoidance of death. Once more Gibran has something to say to us: *“Even as love crowns you so shall he crucify you. Even as he is your growth, so he is for your pruning”*. It is very difficult for us to understand this kind of love. All our natural instincts want life to be pleasurable and without suffering. Suffering we believe is undeserved. It is also very difficult for us to understand when we believe something so firmly why we shouldn't also want everyone else to think as we do and to be intolerant of them if they think otherwise. Yet the evidently more humane and secular world we now live in still reveals enormous areas of prejudice, insensitivity and intolerance. As soon as we deal with one area of injustice in our society, there are still many others not only waiting to surface but already very much in evidence. Perhaps the truth of the Cross is best illustrated by a story of a WW2 survivor from the concentration camp of Auschwitz, Elie Wiesel: *“The SS hanged two Jewish men and a youth with piano wire in front of the whole camp. The men being heavier died quickly but the death throes of the youth lasted half an hour. A man beside me cried out ‘Where is God? Where is he?’ I heard a voice in myself cry ‘Where is he? He is there. He is hanging on the gallows”*. The truth of the Cross is a truth which not only will expect that suffering will be part of life but which suffers itself with the sufferer rather than imposes itself by force. You cannot compel truth.

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The other thing that God is saying through the Cross is that the Love of God will not go, will not disappear. It is lasting and is not deflected by any change in us. It is a love that speaks to those who do not return it. This is the third truth which Christ speaks to us through the Cross, that the character of God which is meant to be reflected in human living is faithfulness to one another mediated through the permanency and commitment of relationship. The heresy of the disposable society is a failure to recognize that love without faithfulness to people idealizes the transient and incomplete and leads to a devaluing of human life. The Cross shows us the enduring character of the love of God. People change and are fickle in their loyalties but nothing changes the love of God. That is why long-term stability of human relationships can reflect something of the love of God. Learning to bear with one another, perhaps occasionally feeling rejected, learning to love without necessarily feeling loved in return, coming to terms with the passing of romantic love – a relationship will pass through some if not all of these phases. Loving to the end is what God does.

It is not surprising that the truths of the Cross seem like folly to us, as they did long ago to the people to whom St Paul was writing in his First Letter to the Corinthians: *“We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Greeks, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength”*. Such truths seem contrary to what we normally want of life. We do not want to be at odds with the world for the sake of the love of Christ, rather to be loved by the world. We do not want to suffer for truth, rather we want to find our own truth and then make others see it. We want life to be easy: not life through death but life by the avoidance of death. We want to love simply where we are loved, and when we are not, to drop love. We do not want to love ultimately and for all time. It is all very difficult. But then Jesus did not promise his followers an easy time of it. *“Take up thy cross, the Saviour said, if thou wouldst my disciple be”*. As we move now towards Holy Week and Easter, let us take courage and ask of ourselves *“What do I mean by the power of love with regard to the world, in relation to my expectations, in regard to my human relationships?”*

“Even as love crowns you, so shall he crucify you.” But the reason is greater than crucifixion and love is greater than crucifixion. Walking in the way of the Cross leads on to the glory of Easter. *“All these things shall love do unto you, that you may know the secrets of your heart and in that knowledge become a fragment of Life’s heart”*.