

“What is Lent For?”

A Sermon at Union Chapel

19 March 2006

Readings: Ps. 19:1–4
Acts 4:32–35 John 2:13–22

The message of the cross is sheer folly to those on their way to
destruction

but to us, who are on the way to salvation, it is the power of God.

Scripture says, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise
and bring to nothing the cleverness of the clever.”

Where is your wise man now, your man of learning, your subtle
debater of the present age?

God has made the wisdom of this world look foolish!

As God in his wisdom ordained, the world failed to find him in
its wisdom

and he chose by the folly of the gospel to save those who have
faith.

Jews demand signs, Greeks look for wisdom,
but we proclaim Christ nailed to the cross;
and though this is an offence to Jews and folly to Gentiles,
yet to those who are called, Jews and Greeks alike,
he is the power of God and the wisdom of God.

The folly of God is wiser than human wisdom,
and the weakness of God stronger than human strength.

I Cor 1:18–25

What is Lent *about*? Or, to put the question another way, what is it *for*?
Here is a possible answer: that it is about giving up things which are bad for

us. That we, who are (as most human beings are, in most things, most of the time) only moderately good at what we do, we humans are only moderately good at being virtuous or godly. And so we need a time, every year, when we can try extra hard, when we can have something that amounts to a spiritual detox, when, at least if we don't advance in virtue, we can at any rate give something up: not so many chocolate truffles, maybe.

Really? Is that correct? What do the readings say? Let us start with the passage from John's gospel: it's a familiar story, but here, in *this* gospel, it has some unfamiliar twists. For one thing, its position: it is almost at the beginning of the gospel, the first genuinely public act in Jesus' ministry (the wedding feast at Cana, which comes before this, is set in a private gathering). Now in the other gospels, the scene in the temple comes at the end of Jesus' career, when he is entering Jerusalem: here, in the fourth gospel, where everything becomes symbolic, it is at the beginning, as if it were saying "this is what Jesus does". It becomes characteristic of all of Jesus' activity.

And the other thing is that Jesus cleanses the temple much more thoroughly: he drives out, not just the money changers, but also the sacrificial animals as well. That is, he shuts down, not just the peripheral bits (buying and selling, commercial activity, and so on) but what the temple did: that is, it sacrificed animals. So he stops that. And he then starts claiming that he, himself, is the real temple. So it becomes very radical.

Paul, now, is another unexpectedly radical figure. And there's another thing as well: he has a great deal to say about wisdom, and rhetoric, and subtle debate, but he himself is, of course, an educated Jew, and his letters are full of educated rabbi language. So is he maybe being a little hypocritical? And the church, too: the church has had, over the centuries, an impressive history of enquiry and scholarship (though it may not show much now). So, has the church been hypocritical, is the church being hypocritical, in paying lip service to these words of Paul's but still recklessly pursuing intellectual enquiry? Us, too, as Congregationalists: we hope – well, we *should* hope – that our church meetings are full of good sense, of reason, maybe even full of wisdom, or at least touched by wisdom occasionally and just enough to matter. So how does this fit with Paul's praise, as it seems, of foolishness?

What Lent is about is this: it is about meeting God. The ten commandments have two which are especially emphasised: the ones which are described in detail, which are not just treated as routine. They are, firstly, the prohibition on images, and, secondly, the command to keep the sabbath. The prohibition on images is important because it stops us confusing God with other things: the commandment to keep the Sabbath, which is basically a commandment to rest, is important because it stops us getting wrapped up in our own deeds, in our obligations, in constantly being compelled to do

stuff.

Sounds simple enough, you may say. But, like all simple goals, these two are difficult to attain. We all perpetually confuse other things – maybe even good things, or at least not bad things, maybe attractive things or even, such is the intricacy of our desires, unattractive things – we all of us confuse other things with God. We confuse our careers with God, we confuse politeness with God, we confuse politics with God, we confuse and confuse and confuse. And we also feel a perpetual need to be doing, to be constantly engaged in activity. And this is good in its way, just because most of the things we confuse with God are also good in their way, but we also, at least some time in our lives, need to be still and meet God. So the commandments want to put a stop to all of this: they want us to end the confusion, to be still, to meet the God who is calling out to us.

And so it is with reason and wisdom in Paul. He – rational Jew that he was – knew very well that there is an important place for reason and wisdom in his life, in his religion: but he is also constantly differentiating between reason in the service of God and the reason “of this world”, the reason “of this present age”. Because, though reason may be important, it is not God, and, because it is not God, it can get in the way of our relationship with God. And reason, though good in itself, can, when it is in service to the god of this world, bring about horrors: we have only to think of the way that Bush’s ideologues unleashed war in Iraq to realise that. As in the hymn this morning, there is no shortage of “all the easy speeches that comfort cruel men”; there is no shortage of means to make anyone who questions the gods of this world seem foolish; and all of this is absolutely characteristic of reason in the service of this world.

What is true of reason and wisdom is true – probably even more – of the forms of our worship. Now there has been a great deal written about how the temple, in Jesus’ time, richly deserved cleansing: how the Jewish religion had become a monstrous edifice of lies and hypocrisy and meaningless commandments, how Jesus only cleansed the temple of commercialism, and so on. Myself, I wonder about this: I wonder, because we actually know very little about Judaism in those days, so how does anyone know if was hypocritical or not? There is an awful lot of lies and hypocrisy about, then and now, but I really do not know if first century Judaism was particularly remarkable for it. And I wonder, more than that, if we would fare any better if Jesus walked in through our door, with or without his rope of cords. I wonder, that is, about the perpetual temptation to forget that our religion should be, before it is anything else, directed towards God.

So, a lot to think about this Lent. It is, I think, no surprise that the themes of this morning seem relevant today: they are universal. But it is

striking that at least two of them – the sorry effects of commercialisation, and the way that constant activity cuts us off from God – seem more relevant now than ever: relevant because, now, we have a rampantly commercial society that demands, of its members, constant and meaningless activity. So, this Lent, we ought, more than anything else, to try to draw ourselves back from the gods of this world, from their cruelty and their easy speeches: we ought to create at least a moment of time in our lives, a moment in which God can speak to us: and we should use the grace that God sends us to start to cleanse ourselves, and our world, from the lies and profanation that this present age inflicts upon us.

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