**Isaiah 60.1-6
Matthew 2.1-12
2nd February 2020

 Foolish Faith?**

How many times, I wonder, after listening to an interview on the radio about a current controversy, or even reading a book on a difficult subject, we come away saying: I’m none the wiser!

In today’s reading from 1 Corinthians St Paul writes that ‘the folly of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

It reads like an upside down equation. This is surprising wisdom.The idea that the Cross of Jesus holds a powerful ideal or contains a wise message took something of a somersault of faith back in Paul’s day, just as it does in ours.

Much more readily, back then, death upon a cross was seen as a mark of judgment and failure. It was society’s way of rubbing your name out of history. You were finished.

No one ever wanted to die of asphyxiation upon a Roman gibbet. No one wanted to be led to a Greenhill Far Away Outside a City Wall.

That’s not where most would have said you find wisdom.

Instead the ‘Wisdom Industry’ of Paul’s day was locked up for the Greeks in the clever rhetoric with which great orators won debates. Wisdom for another religious part of society, says, Paul, for the Jews was locked up in the signs and wonders of the miracles.

Winning an argument or performing a miracle gave you power – but no one ever said that about dying upon a cross.

I suspect a constant in anyone’s life is how we exercise power. We may not think we have much. Yet, when it comes to how we spend our money, the influence we have amongst family or friends and the kind of support we offer to projects at church and out in the community – most of us know what it feels like to wield just a little bit power.

In a recent interview the Archbishop of Canterbury was asked if he agreed that power corrupts. He gave a thoughtful and interesting answer saying*: I think I’d go for the word ‘corrode’ rather ‘corrupt’. I think its corrosive. I think power is like rust, it weakens structure, and in the end the structure fractures.*

I understand that and I can see that a misuse of power slowly destroys, rather than builds up its subject.

So, here, in 1 Corinthians, Paul is taking a sideways look at wisdom and instead of locating it in clever rhetoric or signs and wonders he says that the Cross of Jesus shows us the real wisdom and the real ‘power’ of God.

Yet the wisdom found at the cross redefines where true power lies and what it looks like. It isn’t in authority or tradition but in self-sacrificing service and faithful, generous love. It isn’t a power to control but to give.

Of course, Paul hadn’t always seen the cross in this light. For years he detested its message and loathed the one who had once hung upon it.

Instead Paul was once consumed with the notion that nothing of value was to be found in Jesus of Nazareth or in his cross, indeed he saw him as a usurper and disturber of tradition.

But then, on the Road to Damascus Paul has a vision of Jesus that touched both his head and heart. In a mystical, yet seemingly very real way, Paul meets with the risen Jesus and is completely won over by the message of love he embodied upon the cross. That meeting, that encounter changed Paul’s life, and nothing was ever the same again. Although he knew he now looked foolish to his old friends, Paul thought he had, in fact, found a new sort of wisdom.

Paul wasn’t against the traditional wisdom he’d encountered either amongst the Greeks or Jews and in many ways he’s the apostle who does more than anyone else in those early years to mould Christianity into a theology. He loved argument and logic, it appealed to his mind. Yet he had also learnt that followers of Jesus look at faith through their hearts as well as their heads. It was after his own encounter with Jesus on that road to Damascus that his life changed.

I’m intrigued as to how some of the people who had met with Jesus during his ministry might have viewed his cross at the end. These people had been touched by the servant heart of Jesus, by his acceptance of them in the face of rejection, by the hope he gave them in the face of the despair they felt from others. How would blind Bartimaeus or the tax collector Zacchaeus view the cross? Was it foolishness to them? Would they have seen it as mere failure?

Well, of course, we are never told. But I’d love to imagine their response and I suspect if Zacchaeus had come across some scoffers of Jesus on the streets of Jericho, deriding him saying his crucifixion showed what a failure he was, my guess is that Zacchaeus might have had something to say. Perhaps he would have interrupted them and said something like: if you knew Jesus as I know him, you would see the cross differently. This man taught me to love with generosity of spirit, he offered me a second chance. From what I hear, on Golgotha’s hill he died the way he lived, forgiving others, speaking words of love not hate. You might think him foolish, but I think on the cross he showed us what sacrificial love looks like; that’s the wisdom he shared with me in his life, and the wisdom he displayed in his death.

The other week, on a Sabbatical Sunday, we worshipped alongside the wonderful Methodists of Central Hall, Westminster – the venue for last week’s moving ceremony on World Holocaust Day. We were so touched and encouraged by the sincerity of their welcome and the integrity that so clearly characterises their ministry and witness in that part of London.

Afterwards I did the touristy thing and had my photo taken alongside the life sized statue of John Wesley, Methodism’s founder. He was just 5-foot 1 inch tall – when the Queen unveiled this statue, she said to the Superintendent Minister how pleased she was to be standing next to someone shorter than her.

I digress! John Wesley went about his faith in such a methodical way – that’s where we get the name Methodist. He longed for logical and coherent answers to his questions. He struggled to make it work at Oxford and during his trip to America, yet it all remained dead and remote.

Then, he said, at a meeting for worship not in a cathedral or grand church but in a room at Aldersgate Street in London, he felt his heart strangely warmed. For Wesley Aldersgate Street became his Damascus Road. And it was once he’d ‘encountered’ Jesus that he began to view faith differently.

C.S.Lewis had a similar experience. He battled intellectually with the challenge of Christianity throughout his studies at Oxford. Yet, he says, nothing clicked, indeed he positively set himself against the faith. Until one day, whilst riding his moped to, of all places, Whipsnade Zoo, he felt God touch his heart as well as his head. That night, back in his college room, he said his prayers describing himself as the most reluctant convert in all England.

None of this means we stop asking questions or exploring. None of this means that doubt is incompatible with faith. None of this means we don’t struggle anymore with complexities of scripture and the dogmas of The Church.

But what it does mean, I think, is that if we sense that our lives have been touched by God’s love, if we have, even in the smallest of ways, a sense that the life of Jesus has blessed our own lives – then, from a place of meaningful encounter we can enter into a lifetime of meaningful exploration.

Now, our Gospel reading this morning reminds us that Christians throughout the world observe today as Candlemas, a time to recall that moment when Mary and Joseph present their baby son to God in the temple, to be greeted by the prayers and welcome of Anna and Simeon.

The words attributed to Simeon are now called the Nunc Demittis and when you ponder them they could easily come across as foolish.

Simeon sings of God’s light breaking into the world, a light for the nations so there is so much expectation here, so much hope and anticipation. Yet Simeon isn’t greeting a mighty warrior but a baby in its mother’s arms.

Simeon somehow has the faith and insight to see God’s wisdom and power in a newborn infant.

God comes among us to share our vulnerability and stand with us in our suffering. The life of Jesus with all its ups and downs, especially its apparent failed ending, reflects the nature of God.

Like many of you I’ve sat by the bedside of a loved one in hospital, and when that person has been at their lowest and when the suffering has been hard to understand, I’ve seen a friend or nurse come alongside them, take their hand and speak words of love and comfort. That moment of vulnerability has been met by a moment of the deepest love; a moment kissed by God. It doesn’t take the pain away and it will never explain away the mystery of suffering, but it does bring about something profoundly meaningful, the presence of God in the middle of suffering.

Simeon looks at a baby and sees the essence of God in Jesus. Not a Jesus who will use violence or power, but the Jesus who will serve, go the extra mile and welcome the outcast. The Jesus who will die upon the cross, because sometimes the wisdom of God looks like foolishness.

I want to end today’s sermon by reflecting on the activities of Andrew Graystone, as reported in a recent BMS publication.

Andrew used to be a BBC producer of religious programmes and led the multifaith chaplaincy at the London Olympics.

He's used to working on some pretty big media platforms. Yet he was so horrified by the attack on a mosque by white supremacists in New Zealand in 2019 that he decided to do something so simple and personal that it might well have been thought foolish by his colleagues.

From the convictions of his Christian faith, Andrew Graystone got a small whiteboard and wrote some words on it, went down to his local mosque in Manchester and stood outside it one Friday holding the board for all to see.

The message on that board was addressed to the worshippers inside at Friday prayers, it read: You are my friends, I will keep watch while you pray.

Andrew Graystone made himself vulnerable. He got alongside those who were at risk. He stood by them in solidarity. In short, he surely acted with Christlike compassion and courage.

The supposed ‘foolishness of love’, nothing in the world is more powerful.

May it be so, in the name of The Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.
*Ian Green, Amersham, 30th January 2020*