

THE FOOLISHNESS OF GOD

Lent III

Sunday 8th March 2015

St. Mary, Goudhurst

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There may be some of you here ‘senior’ enough to remember the 1968 Civil Rights March, the Battle of the Bogside in Derry and the subsequent resignation of the mild aristocratic but probably ineffective Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, Captain Terence O’Neill. That was effectively the beginning of what became known as ‘The Troubles’. It was a tragic period in Ulster which saw no hope until the first ceasefire, announced twenty five years later, in August 1994.

Some eight weeks or so after that ceasefire I travelled with the then Archbishop of Canterbury to Ireland. At the time, I was ‘Foreign Secretary’ at Lambeth and since this was a visit to the whole of Ireland, I was automatically down to organise it. The most powerful experience of all for me was in Derry, the city of the Battle of the Bogside and in 1972, *Bloody Sunday*. On the evening of our visit to Derry, the Anglican bishop, James Mehaffey had arranged a concert in the Synod Hall, in cooperation with the Roman Catholic church. Mehaffey had an excellent relationship with the recently retired Catholic bishop, Edward Daly. It was an excellent event, packed, with not a seat to spare. The audience included people from every walk of life and from all religious and cultural traditions. The last number that was sung will never pass from my memory. Two youngish singers – man and woman – sang the Londonderry Air, *Danny Boy*. It is no exaggeration to say there was not a dry eye in the hall. After twenty five years of bitter internecine conflict, there was, for the first time, a ceasefire. *Danny Boy* caught the atmosphere as nothing else could. Those who had argued that the Ulster conflict had no religious element but was entirely political had their vision transformed.

Now why begin here in Goudhurst with that sharpest of all Ulster scenes? Well simply because of the remarkable interplay here between different Christian traditions over so many years. I chose Ulster to show that what you have lived is no luxury. For Christian unity can help eradicate conflict, war and murder. But where precisely do we find the roots of the imperative that calls us back to unity after centuries of division? Most often we are pointed to the seventeenth chapter of John’s gospel, to Jesus’ High Priestly Prayer. But that prayer is very specific to its context; it is rooted in the life of John’s own community. The imperative for unity, however, runs still more deeply and widely in the veins and arteries of Christian tradition.

So, today’s first reading sets the scene in Paul’s powerful and ironic rendering of the gospel message. Let me remind you of just a couple of vignettes from what we heard. Paul writes:

‘The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those of us who are being saved it is the *power of God* . . . for God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.’

As he drives his argument home, Paul pulls no punches: ‘Where is your wise man now? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age?’

But this passion is not some rabid anti-intellectualism springing out of late antiquity. Paul is never an anti-intellectual – some of the most complex theological argument in the

New Testament issues from his pen. No, what Paul is declaiming here is the *cost of the Christian gospel* and its revolutionary nature. It can only be understood and lived in the light of Jesus' self-offering for all humanity. That self-offering is vindicated by God in the triumph of the resurrection, for which this Lenten season prepares us. The sheer cost, at the heart of the gospel, makes our human divisions within the body of Christ take on a rather shallow significance.

Some twenty five years ago now, when I went to work as the Archbishop of Canterbury's Foreign Secretary, my predecessor in that role introduced me to my new work by looking through his in-tray for that day. One letter related to the *Anglican Centre in Rome*. He said, laconically: 'That'll keep you busy for a bit. . .' Well, it has, for twenty five years so far, to be precise – half the length of its entire existence. Next year sees the golden jubilee of the Centre and also the 50th anniversary of the crucial meeting of Michael Ramsey, then Archbishop of Canterbury and Pope Paul VI.

Why have I given so much of my life to the Centre, to the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission and to this cause more widely? The answer is because I am passionately convinced about the ever increasing need for real unity of purpose amongst Christian people. In the 1960s ecumenism was fashionable. Now it's a word that resonates with few, and easily becomes the preserve of groups who like that sort of thing. But Ulster with which I began, much of the Balkans conflict, and now inter-religiously with radicalised Islam, we see how politics can use religion – and notably the Christian gospel - for the darkest of causes. Only together can we fight such evil.

Indeed, Paul shows that at the heart of the gospel is a costliness beyond our imagining, foolishness to those who are perishing, for the salvation of the world, it is the power of God. The foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom. In 1970, John Austin Baker, later Bishop of Salisbury, published arguably the best apologetic statement of the Christian message of the past half century. He did not call his book *Biblical Theology*, nor indeed *Christian Doctrine*; no, he called it simple *The Foolishness of God*.

So, I hope the message is sharp and clear. Your witness here is no luxury, no local enthusiasm – it takes us to the heart of our faith. Do not let it go, deepen it daily. By our lives let us show that, always together. I leave you with Paul again. He sets out our task very clearly:

'We recommend ourselves by the innocence of our behaviour, our grasp of truth, our patience and kindness, by gifts of the Holy Spirit, by sincere love, by declaring the truth, by the power of God . . . we are the impostors who speak the truth, the unknown men whom all men know; dying and still we live; sorrowful yet always rejoicing; as poor yet making many rich; as having nothing yet possessing everything.'

Amen

Readings

I.Cor. I. 18-25

John.2. 13-22