

## MINISTRY RESOURCES FOR SUNDAY 7 MARCH 2021

This was a challenging week. Our Tuesday service at St Stephen's included Communion (first Tuesday of the month) – no easy ask in 30 minutes. And a substantially different, longer service was prepared for the congregation at Brighton-le-Sands for Sunday. Different sermons on different passages (both from the Lectionary) were thus needed. So your reward (if you see it that way), or your torment (if you hold a different view) is that you are receiving reflections on two passages, the gospel (John's account of the "cleansing of the Temple"), and the epistle (Paul on the wisdom of this world in I Corinthians). I hope you find one, or possibly both, of these helpful.

### 1 **Prayers of Adoration and Confession**

(Prayers are largely taken from Psalm 19.)

*The heavens are telling the glory of God;*

*and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.*

*Day to day pours forth speech,*

*and night to night declares knowledge.*

*There is no speech, nor are there words;*

*their voice is not heard;*

*yet their voice goes out through all the earth,*

*and their words to the end of the world.*

*In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,*

*which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,*

*and like a strong man runs its course with joy.*

*Its rising is from the end of the heavens,*

*and its circuit to the end of them;*

*and nothing is hid from its heat.....*

*... the fear of the LORD is pure,*

*enduring forever;*

*the ordinances of the LORD are true*

*and righteous altogether.*

*More to be desired are they than gold,*

*even much fine gold;*

*sweeter also than honey,*

*and drippings of the honeycomb.*

*But who can detect their errors?*

*Clear me from hidden faults.*

Lord our God,

we confess before you and each other that we are a sinful people.

We confess that some of our faults are known to us,

and yet we continue to indulge them;

and we confess that some of our faults are indeed hidden from our view.

Grant us the self-knowledge to see our faults,

the courage to seek to overcome it,

and the strength to persevere, and not to fall away in our endeavour.

And we ask that you grant us your forgiveness,

that you cleanse us of our sinfulness,

for the sake of Jesus our Lord who died that we might be free.

For then, with the psalmist, we can declare,

*"Then I shall be blameless,*

*and innocent of great transgression."*

Amen

2 **Declaration of Forgiveness**

The prophet Joel proclaimed,  
*Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.*  
The mercy of God was made known in Jesus Christ,  
and in him, our sins are forgiven.  
Thanks be to God.

3 **Bible Readings –**

John 2:13-22  
I Corinthians 1:18-25

4 **Sermons:** See below

5 **Prayers of the People and Lord's Prayer**

*(Monday 8<sup>th</sup> is International Women's Day)*

Lord our God,  
Our prayers today are especially for women, both here and everywhere.  
We give you thanks for all women,  
simply for the people they are,  
and for the endless qualities and skills and gifts they share with men;  
but also for the uniqueness  
that comes from being able to bring new life into the world.  
We give thanks, too, for the special caring for others and for each other  
which is so much a part of the character of many women.  
And we give thanks for the disproportionate role played by so many women  
in the nurture of their families,  
while till endeavouring to be true to their own selves.  
But that situation, while all too common,  
is often unjust to the women involved,  
and limiting of their personhood,  
and we pray for a society where what is asked and expected of women is fairer,  
where partners carry their fair share of responsibilities,  
and where women's lives are not sacrificed for their partners and their children.  
We pray for truly equal workplaces,  
which are adapted for the needs of both women and men,  
and which are safe places in every respect for women to fulfil their potential  
and contribute their achievements.  
Father, abhorrent practices  
that have stereotyped, discriminated against and victimised women, and worse,  
keep coming into the light of day.  
We give thanks that at least they are being revealed and addressed,  
but we pray for all women who have suffered in such situations;  
and we pray for wisdom, perseverance and strength  
for those who seek to set things right.  
May such blots on our society rapidly become a matter of shameful history.  
At this time, in particular,  
we pray for the women who work in our Federal Parliament,  
where a growing crescendo of abhorrent revelations  
has revealed a toxic and dangerous environment for women.  
In a place where an example should be evident for the whole nation,  
we pray for a complete change of attitude,

for justice and compassion for the victims and whistle-blowers,  
and for strong, moral leadership to create a better future.  
We pray for the girls and young women in our midst,  
that they might encounter a world that embraces them for the people they are,  
with unlimited potential, and the aspiration to achieve all they dream of,  
and sets no limits simply because they are women.  
We pray too, Father, for women who live in societies  
where they are cast as second-class citizens,  
where their rights and freedoms are curtailed,  
and where their choices are made by others,  
and their purposes are not of their own making.  
Grant them a better world that honours them and nurtures them,  
and offers them opportunities to be the people they can and should be.  
As we approach International Women's Day,  
we pray for all the women and girls of the world,  
wherever they be and whatever the challenges that face them.

Our father in heaven,  
Hallowed be your name.  
Your kingdom come;  
Your will be done  
on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread,  
and forgive us our sins  
as we forgive those who sin against us.  
Save us from the time of trial  
and deliver us from evil,  
for the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,  
now and forever.  
Amen

## 5 **Blessing and Dismissal**

*.... God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom,  
and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.*  
So go in the foolishness and the weakness of God,  
for there are strength and wisdom abounding.  
The blessing of almighty God,  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,  
be with you now,  
and abide with you evermore.  
Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.  
Amen.

## SERMON 1: JOHN 2:13-22

When Lauris and I were in Berlin, we visited the Lutheran Cathedral as tourists, and happily paid the admission charge to do so. While we were there, we learned that, at Sunday worship, there was an English translation available, so we resolved to return, this time as worshipers. The church itself is stunning; and for worship, there are musicians of the highest calibre who play, and a beautiful choir which sings. But, come Sunday, it was quite dismaying to see how many of the pews were full of tourists who, under the guise of attending worship, had managed to avoid the entry fee and could even enjoy a free “concert”. The numerous flashes emanating from their cameras during the service were a dead giveaway.

It’s not surprising then, that at some of the very high profile cathedrals in London, unless you’re a recognised regular, you’re even charged the tourist admission fee to attend Sunday worship. Fair enough, if you’re a tourist trying to get a freebie. But pretty discouraging if you’re a visiting Christian, seeking to worship God. Instead of the welcoming arms of your sisters and brothers in Christ, you’re greeted by their outstretched palms, awaiting your payment.

In very historic or noteworthy churches on the tourist trail, especially, the intersection between the sacred and the commercial is a problem. Where do you draw the line between the building’s spiritual purpose, and the essential business activities needed for its maintenance and upkeep?

The situation Jesus confronted in the Temple in Jerusalem was different in detail, but essentially the same in principle. The Levitical laws specified particular sacrifices be made by visitors to the Temple. In the case of animals, not any old animal would do; it must meet particular ritual specifications. Particularly during the great festivals of Judaism, Jerusalem was thronged by devout pilgrims, all of whom would come to the Temple to make the requisite sacrifice. They were strangers in the city – and it *was* a city. You couldn’t just go around the corner to buy an animal appropriate for the rites. So, in the Temple forecourts, traders were permitted, who would exchange currency as needed, sell animals that met the strict requirements, and generally make life easier for the pilgrims to fulfil their sacred obligations. It was into this scene that Jesus strode, in the incident from the beginning of John’s gospel which we’ve read today. What Jesus did is well-known: he made a makeshift whip, drove the animals out of the Temple area, overturned the tables of the currency traders, and demanded, *Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!* The intersection of commerce and worship had offended him to the very core.

Why do we have this particular passage set for us in the third week of Lent? There’s one very practical reason: although the incident appears in John’s gospel at the *beginning* of Jesus’ ministry, in the other gospels it follows immediately upon Jesus’ final entry into Jerusalem, and is very much a part of the whole passion narrative. It’s pretty much the straw that breaks the camel’s back, for the Temple authorities. It’s pretty integral to the whole Easter story.

But its significance for our Lenten journey runs far deeper than that. Lent is a time of preparation. It’s a time of self-reflection and self-examinations. It’s a time when we seek to put our devotional lives through a sacred sieve, to separate what is valuable, from what is mere accretion or what has gone stale. One of the questions we will ask ourselves is, how genuine is our worship, and how much are we simply going through the motions? How much are we focused on the forms and routines of worship, and how committed are we really to sincere and heartfelt glorification of God and adoration of Jesus Christ?

This story from John’s gospel helps us focus on those important questions. Let me take you back to the words of the prophet Micah, who exemplifies what the prophets of both Israel and Judah had to

say.

*“With what shall I come before the LORD,  
and bow myself before God on high?  
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,  
with calves a year old?  
Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,  
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?  
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,  
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”  
He has told you, O mortal, what is good;  
and what does the LORD require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:6-8)*

The prophets made it very clear that, while animal and other sacrifices might be required by the Law, it was not the sacrifices themselves that God sought or valued. The sacrifices were only of any value if they were offered up by people who lived as God required – by people who were just in their dealings, but with that justice tempered by kindness; by people who walked humbly before God.

Jesus’ attack on the traders in the Temple courts was not just an attack on commercial activities in God’s house. It was an attack on the whole Temple cult itself. The Temple did not exist for people to visit so they could tick some ritualistic box. No one satisfied God’s true requirements by turning up, buying a suitable sacrifice, then offering it up in the ritually correct manner. What God required was that those coming to the Temple did so in complete sincerity; that they approached what was thought of as God’s dwelling place in humility; that they came to recommit themselves to living a life of justice and mercy.

But what confronted Jesus was a slick and profitable operation, where visitors could conveniently discharge their inconvenient duties, then get on. During Lent, we should ask ourselves, both of our own worship, and of the life of our congregation, whether they measure up to the searing test of sincerity and authenticity we find here.

And the symbolism of our passage runs deeper than that. While the Jews had come to believe that God dwelt in the Temple in Jerusalem, of course that had never, and could never have, been true. But the Jesus who entered that Temple was the One in whom God truly *was* incarnate. Jesus’ mere presence exposed the underlying mythology of the Temple as untrue. And the sacrificial animals which he drove out of the Temple courts could never, in the end, do more than provide a makeshift and ephemeral atonement for sin. As the gospel was soon to proclaim, only Jesus himself could be that sacrifice. The true sacrificial lamb drove from the Temple all the ultimately useless substitutes; the true presence of God with his people declared that the so-called “House of God” was, in fact, a vacant lot.

This same Jesus invites us now, with penitent and humble hearts, to come to this table, to share in the bread which is his body given for us, and to drink the wine which is the blood of the new covenant. For this Jesus is the true Temple and the true sacrifice.

Amen

## SERMON 2: I CORINTHIANS 1:18-25

One of my pet hatreds as an historian over the last thirty or so years has been Postmodernism. Postmodernism is a bit of an amorphous term, and it's used in a number of different ways by different people in different contexts. At its heart though, Postmodernism is driven by scepticism, and questioning of anything that has previously been held to be true or obvious. Reality, say the Postmodernists, is a construct; it's a product of our culture, our assumptions and our values. There is no such thing as a reality that is objectively true.

Now I have to be careful here, because to some extent that is true. For example, Lauris and I could have just returned from a holiday together. Was the holiday enjoyable? My reality is that it was a great holiday, because we spent most of our time haunting heritage railways, chasing steam trains and knocking on the doors of signal-boxes. *Lauris'* reality could well be something very different altogether! We are both right, even though we think completely opposite things. These are both realities and they're both true. It's all about the values we bring to our construction of reality.

And that's fair enough, but neither of us would dispute what we actually did on our holiday. We would both regard that as true, as fact. The problem with Postmodernism is that it goes much further: Postmodernism invites people to create their own *truth*, their own *reality*. Nothing is objectively true. All truth is constructed, relative and contested. And you can see why, for an historian, that is such anathema. We *may* differ over whether Julius Caesar was a hero or a villain, but we're *not* at liberty to differ over the *fact* that he crossed the Rubicon in 49BC, and that that he launched a civil war! He just did. And there truly was a civil war. It's not a matter of just being one of various possible realities. Yet the hard-core Postmodernist historian would say that Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon was just a construct. It depends on how you look at it. We are entitled to believe completely different things, and both be right.

In 2017 there was a great example of where that kind of Postmodernist thinking can lead. Kellyanne Conway was a White House advisor, and she went on *Meet the Press*. The White House had released hugely inflated figures for the number of people who had attended President Trump's inauguration. Conway would not agree that the figures were wrong. They were, she said, "alternative facts." There were different ways of viewing the situation; and in the world of Postmodernism, that's okay.

The apostle Paul would not be surprised were he to encounter Postmodernists. But he certainly wouldn't have any sympathy with them. He would look askance at people who devoted their intellect to that kind of thinking, and he would describe their kind of mental gymnastics as the so-called "wisdom" of the world – as a complete self-delusion.

Now most of *us* are probably not Postmodernists, but Paul would undoubtedly look askance at us too, if he heard the way we carry on sometimes. For example, in this day and age, we love to boast about our "smart" devices. Most of us have a "smart" phone; many of us have a "smart" tv; perhaps you've got a "smart" speaker or a "smart" watch; even perhaps a "smart" refrigerator or some other household device. "Smart" cars are on their way, we're assured. We are very sure that ours is the "smart" generation! Paul would shake his head at our self-deception and our arrogance, at our mistaken belief that our intellect must be the acme of human achievement. Paul would see our worship of our own creations, and our celebration of our own intellect, as the "wisdom" of the world. He would regard us as no better than those who play the mind games of Postmodernism.

Whether it's those who deny reality and claim a right to alternative facts, or whether it's the belief that we, our generation – or at least those of us who are ever so clever – is the pinnacle of human intellectual achievement, the fact is that the wisdom of this world can be sadly blinkered, very

short-sighted and seductively self-deceptive. The wisdom of this world so easily becomes obsessed with its own brilliance, and absorbed in its own mind-games, at the expense of a foundation in reality, and a sense of perspective.

In his own day, Paul could see the same thing very clearly. When he was in Athens, we're told that he frequented the civic centre, the *agora*, where he debated some of the philosophers he met there. They were the intellectuals of the day.

In fact, the word "philosopher" means "lover of wisdom", and these men (they were all men) spent their time seeking after wisdom. We're told that Paul debated both epicureans and the stoics. The epicureans and the stoics had very different views of life, but each of them believed they had discerned the truth about life – that is, that they had achieved wisdom. And thinking that they had a monopoly on truth and on wisdom, they were very impressed by themselves.

Now Paul was a well-educated man, both in the Greek and in the Jewish tradition. He was no country bumpkin come to town, to be made mincemeat of by the ever-so-clever intellectuals. And what he had to say to the philosophers he met must have created enough of an impression that he was invited to speak to the prestigious Council of the Areopagus. There he proclaimed the gospel of Jesus to an attentive audience – until, that is, he reached the punchline:

*[God] has fixed a day, he said, on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.*

At the mention of resurrection from death, our account in Acts goes on, most in the audience lost interest and scoffed. That was too much for the wise ones of this world. They *knew* that what Paul was proclaiming was impossible. They were too smart to be taken in by such nonsense. The wisdom of this world had no place for resurrection.

Of course we encounter the very same scepticism in our own day. How many people do you know who accept that Jesus was a real person, and often who agree that his teachings were exceptional; but who simply draw the line at the resurrection? How often do such people treat believers almost with pity, or patronise them as if they (sadly) can't really help being so deluded? After all, no one with an ounce of human intelligence could believe such a thing.

Now as an aside, I can't help pointing out that, in this same modern world that is so impressed with its intellectual prowess, we find apparently intelligent people expressing sincere belief in such things as the power of crystals, the influence over human affairs of celestial bodies, or the magical properties of pyramids. We hear people speak about being in contact with mother earth, or the cosmic reality or the life force; about living on some higher plane than our everyday reality, about having deep insights not available to the rest of us. They speak reverently of their deep "spirituality", and their ability to see past the "nonsense" of the world's religions. .... So the "wisdom" of this world can certainly make room for all kinds of unscientific beliefs, providing they are essentially self-aggrandising and self-indulgent. It was no different in Paul's day; and Paul would recognise all this for what it is.

But to the wise of both Paul's day, and to the wise of our own age, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is just "foolishness". It can only be mocked, and *we* can only be the most gullible and stupid of people.

Paul is very clear in his analysis of why this was so. To rearrange his words a little:

*Greeks desire wisdom....[but], in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom.*

The philosophers whom Paul debated in Athens had reached their conclusions through their own intellectual contemplations. They believed that their wisdom was so great that it had led them to great truths. In that attitude, there was an arrogant self-congratulation, and a preening of their own importance and achievement. It's pretty much the same in our own day. Yet nothing places a greater barrier between ourselves and God than that kind of arrogance. If we worship our own wisdom, then we have no place for the wisdom of God; if we regard ourselves as that important, then there is no room left for God. We have, in fact, succumbed to self-worship and self-adulation.

To the Christians in Corinth, Paul thunders his warning about the so-called "wisdom" of this world:

*For 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. For it is written,*

*"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,  
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."*

*Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age?  
Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?*

Now let's be very clear here. There is a belief among many in our community that, to be a Christian, you need to leave your brain hanging on the coat stand at the church door; that you have to suspend your intelligence, and just believe without thinking. Intelligence has no place in faith; indeed it is the enemy of faith.

And sadly, there are, in fact, churches where that is pretty close to true.

But that is *not* what Paul is saying. Not at all. Paul himself was a remarkably intelligent man. He was well-educated across both Jewish and Graeco-Roman cultures. He clearly knew at least three languages, and probably a fourth. His letters – especially the longer ones – have been described as the work of a genius. He was apparently quite able to hold his own with the intellectuals of his day. Paul was by no means anti-intellectual, and he did not encourage an unthinking faith. His carefully constructed arguments were designed to engage people's intellect. If anything, he probably left behind a lot of people who weren't as smart as he.

What Paul *is* saying is that the intellectual architecture that humans create – what we celebrate as our great "wisdom" – has no room for belief in Jesus Christ. No more could the philosophers and the wise of Paul's day accept resurrection, than can their modern-day equivalents today. It is "foolishness". There is a reality in which people, not God, are at centre-stage. The fifth century BC Greek philosopher, Protagoras, became famous for his claim "that *man* is the measure of all things" – that there is no such thing as objective truth. A view like that has no room for God; a view like that makes of human beings the arbiters of truth and the creators of wisdom.

But, says Paul, to those who can break free of the straightjacket of their own wisdom, who can accept the evidence before their own eyes, who can shift themselves out of the centre of the universe to recognise that that place belongs only to God, Christ crucified is "the power of God and the wisdom of God". Freeing ourselves of the intellectual baggage which celebrates our own smartness, and embodies the belief that we can discern and define ultimate truth and ultimate wisdom, permits us to get the world into its true perspective, and to realise the puniness of what we regard as wisdom.



*For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.*

We can only recognise the self-evident truth of that statement, when we can see past ourselves and our own cleverness and our own wisdom.

The God who created all life; the God who embraced human life in the person of Jesus Christ, the God who sacrificed that life in the agony of the cross, is the very same God who defeated the power of death itself in the act of resurrection. "While we were yet sinners," wrote Paul to the Roman church, "Christ died for us." Nothing stands between us and the salvation and new life that are in Jesus Christ, except the self-aggrandisement and self-deception which we call "wisdom".

Paul's words to the Corinthian church are Paul's words to us.

*Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?*

Are we really so wise that we would let go of the lifeline that the God, who is truly wise, has thrown to us?

*For 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.*

Amen