

SERMON 4 MARCH LENT 3

On Tuesday we had a wonderful talk at Open House from Ina, reflecting on life and the surroundings in Lindfield in 1940s and the changes now. There was a lot of nostalgic nodding of heads and people adding their own memories. There is so much change, so rapidly, nowadays. Nearly everywhere you look there are cranes to be seen, enormous holes dug, and apartment blocks climbing upwards. In Parramatta we now have one 51 stories high, alongside one of a mere 37 floors. Many others are planned. It is a different world, and one that presents challenges that were not the same in the 1940s. It was Catherine Cameron who wrote the hymn "God who stretched the spangled heavens" which goes on to say: "Proudly rise our modern cities, stately buildings row on row; yet their windows, blank, unfeeling, stare on canyoned streets below, where the lonely drift unnoticed in the city's ebb and flow, lost to purpose and to meaning, scarcely caring where they go".

In this new environment it feels as if we are being shaped differently. One of the key words in that verse is "proudly", because it seems that having skyscrapers is now a required mark of success. We can build big. We are important. And life goes on busily as the economy depends on all this growth, apparently. Is this real wisdom?

The Temple was vast. Its scale was different from anything around it. People coming to Jerusalem from the country were impressed and, no doubt, overawed. They were expected to go there, to make the required sacrifice for particular occasions. And so, the outer courts, which themselves would have accommodated several football pitches, had they had them then, was filled with the trade that resulted from the sacrificial requirements and the necessary currency exchange that went with the purchase of these animals and birds. It's hard for us to imagine. It was not just all this commerce. There was a lot of abuse of power and extortion going on as the traders took advantage, especially of those who were poorest and had no bargaining power. That's not

so unfamiliar. Jesus was angry, with good cause. He acts, dramatically. Such an action could not and did not go unchallenged by “the Jews”, as John describes them. Jesus gives the enigmatic reply: “Destroy this temple and I will raise it again in three days.” We know what he meant. Later, after his death, his disciples understood. But people didn’t then. So, he was seen as making a ridiculous statement about rebuilding the physical structure of this vast building which had taken 46 years to build. I was trying to think what a contemporary equivalent might be: maybe all the buildings around Circular Quay or Darling Harbour, in three days. It’s nonsense.

John, to whom we have returned for a couple of weeks, is making a point and he makes this at the beginning of his account of Jesus’ ministry. We are only in chapter 2. The other gospels place this cleansing of the Temple at the beginning of what we call Holy Week. John portrays the power and authority, and the trajectory of Jesus’ life from the word go. Jesus embodied God’s word and God’s wisdom, God’s holiness. When he meets injustice he challenges it. When he comes up against things that belittle holiness, he confronts them. He cleanses the Temple, the focus of religious faith, so it could be a holy space again, even though, later on, it would be destroyed. The powers of the world would destroy his body, but he would be resurrected. His own being would become the holy centre and focus of faith. John writes with hindsight. How could people possibly have understood what he was saying? It seemed nonsense.

These words of John’s carry beliefs that are core to our faith, about Jesus’ death and resurrection. But what do these words really mean for us? The crucifixion of God’s son and then his resurrection! It could seem to make no sense. Faith is about much more than being able to say the right words, especially in a world that thinks it is all nonsense. When I think of those first disciples, I see their bewilderment trying to understand this man, their friend, their teacher. I can imagine their devotion as he lived, always, for what was right, true, meaningful and life-giving. I can almost put myself there and wonder

with them about where he got his extraordinary ability to have the right answer to any challenge, even when they knew they were on shaky ground as regards the Law. All this leads him deeper and deeper into a conflict he will not turn from. In his integrity, he keeps going, though it brings him suffering, a criminal's death on the cross, and seeming defeat for the one who had been claimed as God's own son, just as he said it would. How could they make sense of this? The first disciples knew the man. They witnessed the story. We have heard the story and it has spoken to us. It has worked its way inside us because we find in it a truth that breaks through all barriers of time and place. It has, indeed spoken words of life into our lives, a life that promises defeat of all that is deathly. At times, it seems crazy, impossible and too hard to explain. Paul knew.

It was crazy. It still is. Paul expresses this so well. "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved, it is the power of God. For it is written 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.' Where is the wise?" Then, "We preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles". A few verses later: "the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength." It reminds me of Brian Wren's hymn: "Here hangs a man discarded, a scarecrow lifted high, a nonsense pointing nowhere..."

This nonsense is God's wisdom. Like so much else, we tame it, domesticate it, make it fit into our thought frame. But it escapes our hold because this wisdom is what creates life and hope as it counters what the world would say. This wisdom is what discipleship needs. This wisdom resounds in many other ways: in things like turning the other cheek, losing one's life to find it, humbling oneself, being like little children. This is nonsense in the big scheme of things in our world. It doesn't seem possible. Except that it is. Christ's followers have often been regarded as foolish. The civil rights marchers and anti-nuclear protesters were thought to be mad for their refusal to meet violence with

violence. St Francis was thought to be mad for stripping off his clothes and going on his way with nothing, but people were moved by the life he chose. Now there are Franciscans all around the world and Francis' Christlike way of being still attracts people. One Franciscan, Richard Rohr, wrote: "Christianity is a way of being in the world that is simple, non-violent, shared and loving. However we made it into an established "religion" (and all that goes with that) and avoided the lifestyle change itself. One could be warlike, greedy, racist, selfish and vain in most of Christian history, and still believe that Jesus is our "personal Lord and saviour". The world has no time for such silliness any more. The suffering of Earth is too great.'

We can see the silliness of the world. It is pretty much everywhere. Where is the wisdom? Still quietly waiting for us to catch hold of its truthful foolishness. Still waiting for us to see through the veil of society's pride and self-regard and say "This is nonsense pointing nowhere." We are being asked to name the world's silliness and seek God's wise foolishness.

We are offered a simple example of this wisdom this morning as we gather around a table, and share in bread and wine, the feast of God's gifts for the people of God. The suffering, resurrected Christ with us in our sharing and our caring as we take the things that are basic to life and find that they are made holy for us. The body that was destroyed becomes the temple of our faith. The sacred that transforms the everyday brings about our healing as it draws us together, and fills us with joy and hope. Wisdom abounds when we turn and see and join hands along the way.