

Wisdom and the Cross: Sermon Preached at St John's, Devizes, Sunday 12 September 2021 (The Fifteenth Sunday After Trinity)

Readings – Wisdom 7:26 – 8:1; Mark 8:27–38

“She is more beautiful than the sun, and excels every constellation of the stars.”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

On a bright weekday morning three summers ago, I began my day with Morning Prayer at Coventry Cathedral. Coventry was a convenient place for an overnight break on the long overland journey between Salisbury and Belfast, and I had long wanted to see the Cathedral. I was able to talk my way into spending the hour between the end of the service and the start of public visiting wandering an empty Cathedral on my own, with my camera and tripod.



John Piper's great Baptistery Window at Coventry Cathedral, 2 August 2018. © Gerry Lynch

If you haven't yet been there, I recommend a visit, and also making the effort to visit in the morning, for that is the time when John Piper's baptistery window is at its best, all twenty-eight metres of it, ablaze with sun from the east.

Just occasionally people tell me they don't like Coventry Cathedral. I couldn't disagree more; few church buildings on earth incarnate the reality of the Resurrection more powerfully.

The parish church Cathedral of St Michael, one of the finest medieval parish churches in Europe, was blown to bits during The Blitz on 14 November 1940. As he went into the ruined Cathedral the morning after the destruction, the then

Provost, Richard Howard, was struck by what he called “the deep certainty that as the Cathedral had been crucified with Christ, so it would rise again with Him.”

Less than twenty years later, the very different Modernist Cathedral was dedicated, also to St Michael, surrounded by the still imposing ruins of 14th Century building, and incomprehensible without their presence.



The modern Coventry Cathedral alongside the ruins of the original, 2 August 2018. © Gerry Lynch

Coventry Cathedral incarnates the twin and interconnected British revivals of the two decades after the end of the Second World War – a revival of Christian faith and a revival of high culture. Unquestionably it was the high point of British modernism in the visual arts and architecture: Basil Spence’s cathedral housing Piper’s windows, Graham Sutherland’s tapestry, still in 2021 the largest in the world, and one of Jacob Epstein’s last and finest sculptures. Yet this indubitable gem of 20th Century Christianity could not have existed without the destruction of the magnificent medieval St Michael’s.

Resurrection follows death. Resurrection is not possible without death. Yet that does not make the death any less real, or any less painful, nor does it make the loss of physical presence that death entails any less final or less disturbing. That is the central paradox of the Christian faith. It is, in every sense of the word, disturbing.

The early 21st Century culture we live in, formed by its extraordinary access to material possessions, to raw physical power, to knowledge and learning in abundance, tells us we can have it all. Knowledge, wealth, and power are very

different things than Wisdom. Wisdom tells us that we can't have it all, that nothing lasts forever, and that the death of the old is sometimes necessary to permit the creation of new things.

In the last couple of centuries before the birth of Christ, the Greek-speaking Jewish communities of the Eastern Mediterranean began to associate Wisdom, a definitely feminine concept, with God himself. "For she is a reflection of eternal light", says this morning's Old Testament reading, "a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness." It was in that environment that the writings we know as the Wisdom of Solomon were written, probably in Alexandria, at that time the world's undoubted centre of learning and cleverness. These were writings of people who were indeed clever, as well as being wise, but while sometimes rich, were never truly powerful people. These were writings from an exiled group who lived as a sometimes despised minority among the dominant communities of their world. These were people who understood that you couldn't have it all, that life was full of difficult choices, and that the hardest choices of all were often those that involved sacrificing much that was valued and pleasant to achieve what was truly important.

In contrast, St Peter definitely wanted it all. We all have different gifts, and Peter had courage and honesty aplenty. He was also very clever – he was the first to work out, as we heard in this morning's Gospel, that the rabbi from Nazareth was indeed the Messiah. But he was not over-endowed with wisdom. Even though Jesus had, in the words of this morning's Gospel, said "quite openly" that he had to suffer and die so that he could rise again, Peter didn't want to deal with that sort of heartbreak. Peter didn't want to know that the Kingdom of God was not of this world.

Peter thought that Jesus could waltz into Jerusalem like a gangster, summon twelve legions of angels, get them to zap the chief priests, the scribes, and half the Roman army, and that would solve the world's problems. Because then the good guys would be in charge. Good guys like Jesus' special friend Peter, who

definitely saw himself as the sort of clever and committed man who could usher in a brighter future for the Jewish people and for all of humanity. But Christ's Kingdom was not about seizing power, which would only have ended up with power corrupting the disciples as thoroughly as it had the existing rulers.

Christ effected our salvation not by leading a conquering army but by dying on the Cross in what seemed to be shame and defeat. In this morning's Gospel he tells those of us who seek to follow Him that we too must take up our crosses. I cannot tell you what your Cross is, or what it should be. Life is for all of us a mix of the transcendent, the banal, and the horrific, but our different personalities lead us to experience the same events in very different ways.

There is one thing, however, that I think is common to all of us. That following Christ involves defeat, being overwhelmed by the reality that the world is often governed by raw power and cynicism. Following Christ involves confronting the reality that the good guys won't always win, and that we won't ourselves always be one of the good guys; that the world will always be a place with much darkness, and that some of that darkness will rest within ourselves. It involves confronting the reality that Christianity will never truly be lived out on earth; that Christ's Kingdom really is one not of this world.

And strangely that defeat is liberating, for it shatters our illusions that we are fit to play God, and it is only then that we are free to play the roles that God has made us for us – unique and distinct for each of us.

This is part of the wisdom of the Cross; that it is only when we realise that we will never accomplish everything that we are free to accomplish anything. It is only when we are wise enough to accept our limitations, to accept that we can't fix all the world's problems, that God can show us how to fix the problems that we can actually do something about.

Sometimes that process of godly disillusionment with the world is painful, involving the obliteration of visions that were for all of our lives useful and deeply life-giving. Yet, it is only in that that we are freed to be enlightened fresh visions from God's bottomless store, free to see new ways to make His kingdom come on earth as in heaven, just as it was only after the destruction of the old medieval St Michael's that Spence and Piper, Sutherland and Epstein were enabled to create godly art and architecture that defined their time in religion.

After this deadly and disturbing period of pandemic in our common lives, which has of course included a long interregnum in our own parish, pray that God will grant us fresh visions of how we can continue to build His kingdom into the 2020s and beyond. Pray that He will grant us visions that will show us how to teach the eternal and universal truths of Christian faith to the post-pandemic Devizes that is emerging. Pray that He will grant us the courage to take up our Crosses and die to all that prevents us from being holy bearers of the Gospel, and wisdom to preserve that which is most powerfully life-giving.

Now to the only wise God our saviour, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen.