

Human Wisdom and the Power of God: Sermon Preached on Sunday 5th February 2023 (Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany)

Preached at St John's, Devizes

1 Corinthians 12. 1–12; Matthew 5. 13–20

“I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified ... so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.”

You may know the famous poem by Shelley, named *Ozymandias*. In it, he gazes at an enormous, ancient, shattered statue lying in the pieces in the middle of a desert. The face has broken off from the main body of the statue, and now lies half buried in the sand, but its “sneer of cold command”, artfully and accurately sculpted, still bears witness to a long-forgotten ruler who was used to having his every instruction obeyed.

The inscription below reads:

*My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!*

This was a man who could clearly strike terror into the hearts of his subjects and his enemies alike. The wise thing was obviously to not put yourself at the wrong end of Ozymandias' power. And yet the poem concludes:

*Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.*

It is said that Shelley penned those lines after reading descriptions of the statue of the Pharaoh Ramses II, who lived 3,200 years ago and whose bust now stands in the British Museum. He ruled Egypt shortly before the great crisis of climate and economics that we now know as the Late Bronze Age Collapse, which upended the Mediterranean world of its day. For all his might and power, Ramses' legacy was swept away by forces of history beyond human control.

As St Paul reminds us this morning, the rulers of every age before us have passed away. Those of our age will pass away also, through forces that they are

unlikely to be able to detect in advance, let alone control. The last remnants of the world that I came of age in, that of the long boom between the end of the Cold War and the financial crisis of 2008, have just been swept away by a virus invisible to the naked eye. Perhaps some future poet will see the wreckage of an ancient statue of President Putin, or President Macron, or Boris the Unsteady, and write a meditation of the quality of Shelley's on the transience of power and the shortness of human life. This poem speaks to us not so much because it teaches us something new, but because it reminds us of things that we instinctively know, but which the world, and especially the media locked into its over-excited twenty-four hour news cycle, risks making us forget.

The Church spends much time trying to be relevant, to make its voice heard on the great social and political issues of the day. I don't think its motivation for doing so is in any way wrong – my experience is that when our bishops speak on political issues to the press, they genuinely seek to present the vision of justice and truth that lies at the heart of the Kingdom of God. They seek to present wisdom to those in power. Their problem is that people rarely want to hear a Christian perspective on asylum, or economics, or gay marriage. What they want is to hear people on the telly agreeing with them, so they love the Church when it says things they agree with, but then turn on it when it says things they disagree with. The Church must be aware of the danger of reducing itself to being just another lobby group that provides fodder for talk radio and Twitter.

Indeed, the record of the Church when it intervenes on political matters and it's fairly mixed. Sometimes it's good and sometimes it's awful. Sometimes the Church changes its mind dramatically on things that it had been terribly certain about, just like most clergy and most lay Christians. There is a time and a place for the Church to speak truth to power, but it shouldn't seek to have a set of policies like a political party.

Partly, that's because I believe the Church should set a high value on the judgement of individual Christians, and their freedom of conscience and opinion. More fundamentally, however, it's because the Church should not rest

on human wisdom, or what passes for it at any given moment, but instead must give itself over entirely to the power of God.

St Paul writes that when he came among the Corinthians, he did not come with wisdom, but instead knowing nothing but Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.

Christ did not come to seize power so He could give us a perfect political order – not at His first coming anyway – but instead laid aside all power and gave His life on the Cross to open the way to eternal life for us. Few people would have agreed that this was a wise course of action; yet here we are, 2,000 years later and 2,000 miles away, worshipping Him as Lord and Saviour along with two billion other people.

This morning's Gospel reading is from the Sermon on the Mount, the first public statement that Matthew records Jesus giving about his teaching.

Interestingly, he doesn't start by issuing commands or proclaiming a manifesto. He first of all gives his listeners some strange advice – that they are salt and light. Not that they should be salt and light, but that they *are*.

What an interesting symbolic pairing. These are two things we all know instantly from our day-to-day lives, and yet we don't readily associate salt with light.

Light has some obvious symbolism – of being good in a world that is sometimes evil. More than that, we're called to be like a well-lit city standing on top of a hill. That terrifies us, because we're not that sort of Christian, are we? (I mean not in St John's, anyway! Heaven forfend!) To our credit, that's partly because we know we're not perfect, that we're people of shadow and light. Christians who are all light are unrealistic; they're the sort of people who talk about Jesus a lot with fake plastic smiles that we find ourselves instinctively mistrusting.

Which is why salt is such a fascinating symbolic pairing with light. When we say someone is salty, we mean they're down-to-earth, realistic, perhaps even a bit coarse. Salty people are realistic about others, but they're also very human in themselves, and not afraid to have a bit of a laugh. Salty people often come into their own when everyone is agreeing with an unjust or frankly stupid consensus

because they aren't afraid to be the one to speak out. Although too much saltiness is poisonous, the right amount of salt gives life flavour and keeps us healthy.

To be salt, and to be light, isn't to have the answer to all the world's problems. Instead, this is a toolkit for a world where we are not in control, which is sometimes chaotic and random; where the best laid plans go oft awry, perhaps upended by a pandemic, or a war. Yet no matter what the circumstances, if you can be salt, and be light, you will be a blessing to those around you.

Above all be faithful to Christ, who loves each and every one of you so much that he died on the Cross to open the way to eternal life for you. That eternal life is of immeasurably more worth than anything any rulers of this passing age can promise. Be light, and be salt, and you will not only give good things to those who encounter you in this earthly life, but you will be a source of wisdom to them that is greater than all the powers on this Earth.

And now to God be the glory, the Father the source of all Wisdom, the Son who taught us Wisdom, the Spirit who is Wisdom, now and forever, as is most justly his due. Amen.