

Bishop Richard Harries Sermon on Sunday 7th March 2021

Lent III at St Mary's, Barnes

1 Corinthians 1.18-25; John 2.13-22

Do you ever have the feeling, in a moment of heightened Christian awareness, that you don't really belong to the world as reflected in the media? The world of money and fashion and celebrities? The world we read about in newspapers and magazines and see on TV? If so, you are in good company. It was some such a feeling that Paul experienced and which he conveys so powerfully in today's epistle. He sees a sharp divide between what the world counts as important and what God has shown to really matter. The message of the cross he says is sheer folly to those on the road to self-destruction. Jews demand signs, Greeks look for wisdom but we proclaim Christ nailed to the cross. Over the scrambling, fighting deluded world hangs that suffering figure on the cross, calling into question its values; raising a large question mark over so much of what we think is important.

He is not arguing for a world denying or puritan point of view. On the contrary. The world was created by God as good and there is a lot of good in it. There is beauty, great art and music. There are decent people struggling to make a go of their lives, the brilliant work of scientists, the dedication of NHS and social care workers. There are people of real integrity in public service and business, and, as the lockdown has shown there is a real well of human kindness in a time of crisis. All this is there, whatever people's beliefs happen to be, and it is to be celebrated. All this we might call the ordinary, decent world. But at the same time there is another world, the world of the Sunday Times Rich List, the world of carefully graded A list, B list C list celebrities, the world of glossy magazines, the world of naked political ambition, the world of those you want to be seen with and those you don't. That world hovers about the ordinary decent world and casts its spell. And because that ordinary decent world is not quite so decent as it thinks, it sometimes allows itself to be seduced. The

result is that the ordinary decent world can become the world of Vanity Fair, the world so brilliantly satirised in William Makepeace Thackeray's novel of that name. So, we have the ordinary world and out of it two potential worlds - the ordinary world sucked into and twisted into Vanity Fair and the ordinary world standing before the cross of Christ and becoming luminous to the glory of God in Christ. So, we the choice of the world as Vanity Fair or, shall we say, God's pleasure garden?

The New Testament uses a number of images to contrast these two worlds. One is that between the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of God's beloved son. Another is between the City of God and the earthly city. Another between our citizenship of heaven and our earthly citizenship. In today's intriguing Gospel there is yet another image.

If you go to Jerusalem today you can still see the site of Herod's Temple, on which there now stands the Dome of the Rock and the El Aqsa mosque. In the time of Jesus, the temple dominated the city. It was the centre of Jewish religion and it has been reckoned that about a third of the city were economically dependent on it. Part of Jesus's message was that in the coming kingdom that temple of stone would be replaced by a spiritual temple appropriate to a new age. For example, in Matthew's account of the trial of Jesus we read 'Finally two men alleged that he had said "I can pull down the temple of God and rebuild it in three days."' It is this claim that is referred to in today's Gospel with the intriguing gloss 'But the temple he was speaking of was his body'. That body is his risen body, and Christians are of course limbs in that body. So it is that later in his letter to the Corinthians Paul writes 'Surely you know that you are God's temple, where the spirit of God dwells.' (1Cor 3.16)

In the midst of Jerusalem stood the temple of stone, the place where above all God was present and made himself known. In the midst of the world stands the new spiritual temple of human hearts yielded to Christ, and in whom he dwells.

We all go about our business in the ordinary decent world. It is God's world and there is much to celebrate in it. But about that world stands the glamorous haze of Vanity Fair and its tempting allure. So, in the midst of that ordinary decent world, though world not quite so decent as it likes to think, God has built his temple on the cross and resurrection of Christ. This is where God dwells, and it is from within this temple that life is to be seen and lived. It is this which keeps the ordinary decent world decent and which makes it something more than decent, something which reflects God. We are as Paul put it elsewhere living stones in that temple.

So, if like St Paul you are sometimes brought up short by the sense that you don't really belong to the world which others relish and take for granted, that is a good feeling to have. It's a feeling to be cherished and lived by, because the folly of the cross really does raise a radical question mark of so much that we live by.

But it does more than that. For as Paul said the cross is the power and the wisdom of God and 'The folly of God is wiser than human wisdom and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.'

He then goes on, in the verses after today's epistle' to give two examples of what he means. He reminds his readers that the congregation at Corinth was not made up of movers and shakers, but rather lowly people. 'He has chosen things without rank or standing in the world, mere nothings, to overthrow the existing order' he writes. And of himself he says 'So it was my friends, that I came among you without any pretensions to eloquence or wisdom. I would not claim to know anything but Jesus Christ-Christ nailed to the cross.I came before you in weakness, in fear, in great trepidation.'

It is in that sense of weakness, that humility, that God's spiritual power and wisdom are known. His spirit illuminating and guiding our lives, his power taking us beyond ourselves in a willingness to serve him and one another.