

The Foolishness of God ...

... is wiser than human wisdom

A sermon given on the Third Sunday of Lent, 13rd March 2024, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster

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

Well, it's lovely this morning to welcome William and Wolfheart and Melissa as they present themselves for baptism and as we formally incorporate them into the family of God. And, of course, at the heart of baptism is the symbol of water. But water is a notoriously double-edged symbol. On the one hand, it speaks of life: without water, we die of thirst; and it speaks powerfully of refreshment and renewal and of the very source of life; in the Bible, water is often spoken of in this way - at the well outside Samaria, Jesus offers water that will be like a spring welling up to eternal life; and in the Book of Revelation, St. John the Divine has a vision of the risen Christ offering water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. So baptism refers to all of that. But if there's too much water, the opposite happens: with all the recent wet weather, local farmers trying to sow their fields are simply watching their crops drown; and as a bishop once said about baptism, it's not a wetting, it's a drowning. So baptism signifies both life. [They're getting nervous at the front here.] Now, baptism signifies both death and life. But the dying bit probably isn't at the front of our minds when we bring infants to the font.

We're here in the same kind of territory as St. Paul is writing about in that first reading when he talks about the foolishness of the cross.

We would all like our faith to be clear and reasonable and common sense, or we would like it to be spectacular and sensational and miraculous beyond doubt. But unfortunately, God doesn't play like that. He won't conform to our reason and he won't conform to our thirst for spectacle. He is bigger than that, which means he's more likely to be revealed in foolishness than in cleverness.

As St. Paul puts it, *"Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom. But we proclaim Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to gentiles; but to those who are called - both Jews and Greeks - Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God."* And every time we see an image of the cross, we should be asking ourselves, 'What is the son of God doing there? How does the maker of the universe reveal himself on a cross?'

And that's a mystery we shall never completely fathom. But part of the answer is that on the cross, Jesus is doing for us something we couldn't do for ourselves: he is absorbing the power of death in order to overcome it; he is entering our mortality so that we might be set free from its limits; he is bearing the judgement upon all the world's sin and rejection of God, so that you and I might experience mercy and forgiveness, instead of a judgement that would destroy us.

And on the cross, Jesus is not only doing something for us, he's also doing something with us, coming alongside us in our weakness and in our captivity to suffering and death, so that whatever happens to us we may be assured that we are not alone. And baptism is a sign of all of this: in baptism, we are joined with Jesus in his death on the cross; in baptism, we are overwhelmed and drowned, as it were, by the waters of death in order that we may be raised

with Christ to newness of life: to the world, that just sounds foolish; to the world, it makes no sense; to a world committed to the lust for power and status and self, the idea of God being revealed on a cross is absurd.

But to those who've discovered that reason does have its limits, and to those who realise that displays of power tend to crush people rather than set them free, and to those who sense that love can be both vulnerable and robust at the same time, the cross of Christ can be embraced as the power of God.

As Paul says again, *"God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength."*

So, William, Wolfheart and Melissa, as you enter the waters of baptism this morning, may you discover the wisdom of God's foolishness; may you draw strength from God's weakness; and may you be drowned in the love of God, which sets you free to live in the abundance of the life of the crucified and risen Christ.

Reading Text

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

18 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. 19 For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.' 20 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? 21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. 22 For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, 23 but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24 but to those who are 'the called', both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

John 2.13-22

13 The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 14 In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables. 15 Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. 16 He told those who were selling the doves, 'Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a market-place!' 17 His disciples remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for your house will consume me.' 18 The Jews then said to him, 'What sign can you show us for doing this?' 19 Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' 20 The Jews then said, 'This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?' 21 But he was speaking of the temple of his body. 22 After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.