

Turning things upside down

A sermon preached by Revd Viv Bridges on 3rd Sunday in Lent 2018

Refs: 1 Corinthians 1.18-25, John 2.13-22

In today's Gospel reading, we hear about Jesus losing his temper - literally turning over the tables of the money-changers. The Temple should have been a place of prayer, of respect and reverence. But when Jesus entered, he found it in turmoil, chaotic, with people shamelessly using it as a place to make money, to exploit and steal from others.

At the Passover, every adult male Jew who lived within 15 miles of the Temple had to attend the feast. There were also Jews scattered all over Palestine and indeed the world, and every male Jew tried to be in Jerusalem for at least one Passover in their lifetime. So there were thousands of people in Jerusalem. Jews over 19 had to pay the Temple tax. In itself this was quite justified - the work of the Temple had to be paid for. But it had to be paid in special coins - Galilean shekels or Temple shekels - so the many people who came from outside Galilee had to exchange their currency. It was justifiable that the money-changers should charge some commission - this was how they made their own living - but many were abusing this. Instead of a small, reasonable commission they were charging exorbitant sums. Also inside the Temple, people were charging exorbitant amounts for the oxen, sheep or doves that people bought as sacrifices. Jesus was furious to see the inside of the Temple turned into a raucous market place, rather than the place of reverence it should have been, and to see so many people lining their pockets at the expense of others.

His reaction to this would have seemed like foolishness to those around him, but many of the things Jesus did challenged the accepted practices that enabled those with some power or authority to line their own pockets at the expense of the poor and vulnerable, and would therefore have seemed foolish.

St Paul writes about other ways in which Jesus turned the values of his time and age upside down. Paul knew that it was only by following a path of humiliation, suffering and death, that Jesus had been able to win the final victory over evil. For Christians, the cross signifies the true way to salvation. But for Jews, this was madness. It seemed impossible that any Son of God or Messiah could possibly be hurt in any way, let alone be put to death on a cross - the most humiliating death possible. So Christ turned upside down the idea that the Messiah, the chosen of God, would use power and might to bring salvation.

There were other reasons why Jews and Greeks could not accept Jesus as the Christ. The Jews looked for signs - someone who could do great miracles and who would win over the people in this way. But Jesus rejected this path right at the beginning of his ministry. In the wilderness he refused to change stones to bread, or show that angels would carry him safely off the pinnacle of the Temple, and he refused to bow down and worship wealth, power or authority. Of course he did miracles, but only for the benefit of people who were in difficulty, not just to impress others. He did promise one great miracle - his resurrection from the dead, but the Jews refused to believe this.

The Greeks also saw the message of salvation through the cross as foolish. There were possibly two reasons. One was that, for them, God was unable to feel anything because if he could, he would be vulnerable, less powerful than those who could cause him to feel. So for the Greeks, it would also seem impossible that God could suffer on a cross. The Greeks looked for 'wisdom' - not in the sense we now understand, nor the Biblical sense. Greeks thought that wisdom was having a clever mind or tongue. So someone who could use argument, 'mathematical logic' if you like, to prove something, even if it was obviously wrong, was counted wise. The message that was being spread abroad about Jesus, about his death and resurrection, could not be 'argued' logically - it made no sense, and so it was foolishness.

Our readings are about Jesus turning upside down the world's values - the importance of money, power, status, its fixation with needing proof - some sort of sign or of logical argument.

Those values are still with us today, but I believe we live in an amazing age of turning things upside down. We are constantly bombarded with reports of abuse of many different kinds. And isn't that wonderful! Not that the actions themselves are wonderful, but the fact that we hear about them and respond with horror!

Not long ago it was accepted that heads of businesses should earn huge sums of money, even if others earned a pittance. No one questioned that they received huge bonuses even if the company was in trouble and others losing their jobs. Not long ago those - frail and vulnerable through age or disability or considered inferior because of their skin, gender or sexuality - were considered nuisances and not worthy of respect or humane treatment. Not long ago it was accepted, or ignored, that those in positions of authority and trust would sometimes take advantage of the vulnerable - abusing women or young people. Society seemed to accept that possessing power in whatever form - status, wealth, authority - justified taking advantage of those less fortunate. But this is being turned upside down. Society is rejecting those old values. It is slowly insisting that everyone - including the weakest and most vulnerable members of society - should be treated with respect. It is beginning to reject the misuse of power in the abuse of others. There's still a long way to go. To turn things upside down is a battle that must be fought on two levels - social or cultural, and personal. on the social level. The war won't be won on a social level until every individual is prepared to fight the temptation to put self first. Persuading everyone to put the rights and dignity of others before their own desires is a huge task. But, as I have suggested, the battle is being fought, and attitudes are changing.

I'm not sure we similar glimmers of hope that the world's fixation with the need for signs and for proof is waning. In fact, we live in an age where we depend on these things far more than ever before.

We don't look for miracles, but we constantly look for proof. We are bombarded with the results of this experiment, or that survey, so we are becoming dependent on statistics or experimental evidence for every decision we make - everything we buy or do. Sometimes it feels there is too much proof; chaos - turmoil - a bit like in the Temple, we don't know what to believe. One day we're told we mustn't drink alcohol, another day we're told we should. Of course, many discoveries are useful, but this dependency on scientific fact seems to have thrown common sense out of the window. For many, scientific knowledge has destroyed the ability to believe in anything else.

We seem to accept unquestioningly what scientists tell us - based on the minutest pieces of evidence and the intricate workings of a few people's minds. But we find it difficult to believe in the considerable written evidence of Jesus Christ or the witness of his power by many people throughout the ages. I say this as a physicist and scientist. So turning around this way of the world, the need for proof, is more difficult. Faith is a matter of the heart and if one's heart is closed because of an inability to look anywhere other than science, then it will be difficult for God to be heard or experienced.

In Lent, we're challenged to recommit ourselves to Christ's upside down values. This doesn't mean rejecting the things of the world, rather turning around our attitude to them. God asks us to put love of him before our love of possessions, power, status - things that should be used to God's glory. God asks us not to let bodily desires take possession of us, but rather to look after our bodies so they become the Temples of the Holy Spirit that St Paul describes. God doesn't ask us to dismiss all the scientific, intellectual knowledge we are surrounded with. Rather, he asks us to use it to better understand his wonderful creation, and to look after it. He asks us to put our faith, not in worldly knowledge but in him, in the power of his Spirit, and to trust in the message of the Cross - that salvation lies in humility, self-sacrifice, In Jesus Christ - crucified, and died, but risen again, and with us always. Amen.