

SERMON FROM COVENTRY CATHEDRAL

PREACHER Graham Usher, Bishop of Dudley

DATE 20 September 2015

EVENT The Cathedral Eucharist, 10.30 am

BIBLE READINGS James 3.13 – 4.3, 7-8a; Mark 9.30-37

THEME 'Reconciling a Wounded Planet'

Two sentences, one from each of our readings: 'Who is wise and understanding among you?'¹ 'Then Jesus took a little child and put it among them'².

There was once a missionary who was walking in the savannah in Africa when he heard the ominous noise of a lion behind him. "Oh Lord," prayed the missionary, falling to his knees, "Grant in thy goodness that the lion walking behind me is a good Christian lion." And there was silence. And then the missionary saw the lion lick his lips and then heard the lion praying as well: "For all that I'm about to receive may the Lord make me truly thankful!"

Those of us who have been gathered in and around this Cathedral this week have been seeking wisdom for the next step. We have enjoyed good food, friendly company, profound conversations, inspiring talks and art and theatre. And through all of that we have been seeking wisdom about how God in Christ reconciles the whole wounded planet, drawing to himself every dragonfly and dandelion, even every member of the genus of mites named *Darthvaderum*!

And in that economy of God there is also the obscure brine shrimp from a lake in Russia, a tiny thing, but it has the longest scientific name that would take up most of a Tweet:

Bracyurupuskyodermatogammarus greivlingwmnemnotus. I just added that in in case it comes up in your next pub quiz!

The letter of James keeps pushing wisdom to the forefront of our thinking. Into our contemporary world, James, one of the first Christian ethicists, speaks. He asks simply this: 'Who is wise and understanding among you?' In a noisy world competing voices block out wisdom's quiet and steady call. People refuse her counsel and do not listen to her. James speaks of the 'wisdom from below' that crowds out the pure, peaceable, flexible, merciful, and fruitful ways of the 'wisdom from above'.

So who is wise and understanding?

James continually points us in the direction of God. We are to 'draw near to God' because 'the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom'³. 'Draw near to God and God will draw near to you'⁴. It's here that we find the well of the water of life; the fountain of wisdom. And it's by drinking from this fountain that we grow in wisdom; daily living God's wisdom and allowing it to shape our practice.

As I have sat in this cathedral this week the Graham Sutherland tapestry has drawn me nearer to Jesus in a way that I had not expected. As I have sat within the prayer of silence and the silence of prayer, the four creatures around Jesus in the tapestry have slowly caught me up in their movement

¹ James 3.13

² Mark 9.36

³ Proverbs 9.10

⁴ James 4.8a

towards him. This tapestry draws us all together in its ecologically green background to be nearer to Christ; in him all things are brought together. And Christ looks out across this cathedral to see the vibrancy of God's creation and the harrowing we have brought it. As we return from Communion we too will see Christ's view: the colours of the windows first reminding us of the stunning, awesome, vibrant beauty of creation; we walk on a floor of fossils linking us across the ages of creations; and then we see the old cathedral's ruins reminding us of our role in tikkun olam, the Hebrew term meaning 'to mend the world'. We go out living in the shadow of the Galilean, 'the very image of the invisible God'⁵, who walked gently on the earth.

To appreciate God's wisdom we need to spend time at Jesus' pace. He walked everywhere, taking in his surroundings, feeling underfoot the hard ground, the stony ground, the ground where the birds pecked and the thistles grew, and the soft loam where the wheat produced the harvest⁶. And by walking the land at human pace he was also able to hear the cry of the poor and sick, as well as the talk of the children. I wonder if his healings felt to those made whole as if they were 'walking in the cool of the evening breeze'?⁷ I wonder if he saw in a child an icon back to the harmony of the whole of creation in the first garden? I wonder if this was why he brought an insignificant child into the midst of his disciples when envy and selfish ambition had begun to consume them?

A child in middle-eastern village culture was a nobody, a non-person. It wasn't just that children were to be seen and not heard. They were to be largely invisible. The environmental change that our wounded planet is seeing is having a disproportionate effect on children and others who are the nobodies and the invisible of our world despite them being least responsible for its causes. It is estimated that more than 88% of the existing global burden of disease due to climate change occurs in children under the age of five. Children know about the affect global warming is having on their food, their water, their education, the air that they breathe, and the diseases and extreme weather and other natural disasters that threaten to overwhelm them or displace them.

Yet, children are often the most passionate about the environment. The presence of local children has enhanced our conference and their art work around the cathedral carried a very direct message. They get it when we adults think of every excuse under the burning sun not to change habits. A UNICEF UK / Ipsos MORI poll carried out in 2013 highlighted that 74% of young people age 11-16 in Britain agreed that they are worried about how climate change will affect their future and believe that the world will have changed as a result of climate change by the time they are adults. Nearly two thirds of the same group were worried about how climate change will affect children and families in developing countries⁸.

UNICEF have said that to find solutions 'the participation of young people is no longer something to which government and international organisations can simply pay lip service – it is necessary if the interests of future generations of humanity are to be safeguarded'⁹ and that 'putting young people front and centre could help to unlock the climate change impasse – and safeguard the future of generations of children to come'¹⁰.

⁵ 5 Colossians 1.15

⁶ Based on the parable of the sower Mark 4.39

⁷ Genesis 3.8

⁸ Climate Change: Children's Challenge (2013) UNICEF p.2

⁹ The Challenges of Climate Change: Children on the Front Line (2014) UNICEF p.viii

¹⁰ Ibid p.4

The evidence is clear: children bear the brunt of the impact of climate change and want to see change on the issue. 'Whoever welcomes one of these invisible ones welcomes me'¹¹, said Jesus.

The scriptures keep pointing us to the fact that if we want to encounter Jesus, we will find him in the guise of the nobodies and those who are otherwise invisible.

Reconciling a wounded planet begins with you and me seeking out the nobodies and the otherwise invisible.

You and me drawing close so that we might learn from them of God's wisdom.

You and me living their Christ-focussed and Christ-simplified life.

You and me living out in practical ways our gleanings of his infinite wisdom.

You and me coming to this holy table to find in the grain once scattered in the fields and the grapes once dispersed on the hillside the wisdom of God in Jesus broken on the cross of the world and now dancing at the heart of creation.

'Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you'.

We are called to care for the earth in Jesus' name. He who walked the land, ate the ripe corn and asked for water from a well.

He who spoke of lilies of the field and the birds of the air and how precious they are in the sight of God. He who slept under the stars with nowhere to lay his head and on his last night kept watch under the sweet smell of a grove of olive trees. He who is Lord of all the earth and cosmos.

He demands of us to wonder at creation, to repent for our waste and misuse, to live simply so that others might simply live, to model a way of being in his shadow that will enlighten the whole world, and so hold together God's kingdom in our prayer, that it might be 'on earth as it is in heaven'¹². Back in 1974 the Anglo-Catholic priest theologian and disturber of complacency, Father Kenneth Leech, wrote, 'If spirituality and prophecy are not held together, both must decay. There must be contemplation and resistance, holiness and justice, prayer and politics. For our vision is of a God whose holiness fills heaven and earth, and who has called all people into freedom, justice and peace within his new order'¹³. Ken Leech died last week. His words remain prophetic for our day. And I say in response, 'Amen', 'Amen', 'Amen'.

¹¹ Mark 9.37

¹² Matthew 6.10

¹³ Leech, K. (1974) Action for Revival (leaflet) quoted at <https://stchrysostoms.wordpress.com/2015/09/13/fr-ken-leech-1939-2015/>