

2nd February 2020

Preacher: Jen Smith

Hymns: 85 Praise the Lord who reigns above
 713 Show me how to stand for justice
 499 Great God, your love has called us here
 550 Forth in thy name, O Lord, I go

Readings: Micah 6:1-8
 1 Corinthians 1:18-31
 Matthew 5:1-12

“What is foolish in the world”

Holy God, break your word as bread for the feeding of our souls. And may the words of my lips and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Silence

Greetings, friends on this first Sunday in February, the first Sunday when we as citizens, residents, and visitors to the United Kingdom are no longer a part of the European Union.

And I hope I am speaking today in my own voice – but there’s a chance that Steven or someone else is speaking this text, as God chose this week to make fools of the would-be wise and in my case, get acute laryngitis. Since Tuesday night I’ve not been able to utter a word – it has been a quiet week in our house – and yes, jokes have been made, I won’t repeat them here. It’s galling as I am not otherwise especially ill, nor contagious – I don’t even have a sore throat, I just can’t speak.

And around us, all the tumultuous news of Corona virus, and Brexit, and trade warnings, and who belongs and who does not – last week for Holocaust memorial day, the BBC aired a documentary called ‘the Windermere children’ telling the true story of 300 children rescued from an extermination camp who had been received as refugees in in 1945, and were looked after together for 4 months in a disused site in Lake Windermere. At the first meal where the children gathered, baskets of sliced bread were out on the table. When the Rabbi gave the blessing, the children dived on the bread – not understanding it was only an accompaniment to the main course. Dived on it, seized it, ran from the building and hid it. ‘Let them see there is enough, more bread – called out the director. Let them see it will not run out.’

The children had learned that bread was scarce. Had to unlearn that before they could actually get to the meal, ironically. The ethic of scarcity in which they had been cruelly schooled prevented them from being fed. Watch it, I’d recommend it – it will remind you who we are, we who live on this island together.

But it seems to me that all around us, just under the rhetoric of the news, is an ethic of scarcity – a world counselling us to get and grab and save and seize and hoard and hide. Telling us it is foolish to do anything else.

An ethic of scarcity into which, if we are not careful, we too will be seduced to abide and make our home. And where there is an ethic of scarcity, even when there is enough, life is fearful. Defensive. Divided. Others are a threat. And we do not get to feast, even when there is plenty of bread.

I do not think God wants us today to live in this ethic of scarcity. Even should the day come when our bank accounts and cupboards are actually empty – I do not think God wants us to live in a diffuse fearful cringing half-life. Because the problem with living in an ethic of scarcity is that it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. I think God wants something more for us, and ask something simpler for us in our engagement with this world.

And so I come with an awareness of where we are today, this first Sunday in February, and bring that to the extraordinary scripture set for this Sunday: the scolding sharp rebuke in Micah – what does God require of you? Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with God.

Friends, please note, this is not a suggestion in the scripture, not a ‘maybe do this if it is a good day and you are feeling alright and are well and have enough time and money to take the time.’

And these things are offered to us instead of all the list of other things we think God might want – big gestures, massive thank offerings, the sacrifice even of our first born children?

Do justice. Love kindness, walk humbly with God.

And add that to Jesus’ teaching in Matthew – this passage at the beginning of the sermon on the mount, which we call the ‘beatitudes’ for its list of blessings.

Blessed are the poor in spirit. Those who mourn. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Those who are merciful, and pure of heart, who make peace. And then Jesus turns and looks right out of the text at each of us – ‘Blessed are you, when people revile you and persecute you, and utter falsehood against you on my account.’

Foolishness, surely? Perhaps, but foolishness to shame the wise, in Paul’s words to the church in Corinth.

Friends, here in the scripture is foolishness that can free us so that we can do justice. Love mercy, and walk humbly with God.

I think a lot about national identity – what a passport means, whether blue or red, what home is. What welcome means.

And yet. Many years ago, in the spring of 2001 I met a fool to shame the wise. His witness has stayed with me – or maybe I was the fool, I have never been sure. This man was a Muslim – an Egyptian taxi driver in the town of Luxor, set on the bank of the Nile in middle Egypt, where I was a tourist looking for a taxi.

It was hot – Palm Sunday, 2001.

On a whim, I chose from the dozens of taxis lined up, one with an older man for a driver, who had hung and a4 picture of the American actor Steve McQueen from his mirror. I've always liked Steve McQueen, and though the photo obscured a good third of the field of vision, I thought why not? The driver's name was Muhammed Abdul Bassett.

We set off. A few minutes down the road, Muhammed made eye contact with me in the mirror – 'Are you a Christian,' he asked. 'Yes,' I answered, wondering where this was going. 'Ah! Then you can help me! He said.

The year before, a disturbed young man had opened fire on tourists in the valley of the queens, and tourism was down that season in Luxor. Muhammed explained to me that he was trying to learn Christian words that he could drop into English conversation that would make Christians feel welcome in his taxi – feel at home.

He turned full around in the driver's seat, Steve McQueen spinning in the breeze – and cars honking around us, to show me an old dog-eared English to Arabic missionary phrase book. Words for Christian faith. He was going letter by letter and was up to the letter R, learning words to make people like me feel at home.

'I have a proposition,' he said. 'Instead of paying, you will teach me sentences for 4 words I can use, maybe just drop into conversation, so Christians will know they are welcome because I am using their words.'

I had booked the taxi for 6 hours, so I thought this was a bit dodgy. But I'm not one to turn down a bargain, so I said 'Ok, you're on.' Was he the fool, or was I?

Muhammed dropped me at the site I wanted to visit, and I went off –it was the heat of mid-afternoon when I got back to the place he had left me – I'll be honest to say I did not expect to find him – but there he was, waiting in the open door of the taxi with a metal cup of mint tea.

'AH, we begin! He said. Here are the words – Christian words. 'Recreation, Redemption, Rejoicing, Rejuvenation.' Now remember, all preachers' stories are true, but some are more true than others – this is really true.

Recreation, Redemption, Rejoicing, Rejuvenation. 'Now you must give me everyday sentences to use them, so I can show Christian passengers they are still welcome in Egypt.' Muhammed looked up at me expectantly, pencil in hand.

Everyday sentences, for what should indeed be everyday Christian words – yet are they? For those of us trying to resist the ethics of scarcity, and live in the blessings described by Jesus. For those of us trying as Micah told us, to do justice, and love mercy, and walk humbly with God. Recreation, Redemption, Rejoicing, Rejuvenation.

The whole thing was a scam, clearly - completely foolish – he was going to give me a whole days' driving, for a few sentences that any other fool could see where going nowhere in terms of making anyone feel welcome? A scam and foolish.

I don't remember what sentences I gave him, for his words beginning in R.

I do remember that he took no money for the day, and that we talked long on the drive home about Steve McQueen movies, many of which were not then available in Egypt. I remember that when I got home I ordered the DVDs of these movies, and sent them to him. And that he sent back a letter, written in block capitals – thanking me. By then we had passed September 2001 and the world had largely forgotten the gunman in the valley of the queens in Luxor.

‘Strong angels are standing over you to protect you and bring peace,’ Muhammed wrote in the letter.

The point is this. Foolishness as the world sees it is one of God’s great currencies.

We are serious people, we read the times and the issues of the day and we cannot squint hard enough at them to make them anything other than fearful – risk and hazard lies ahead.

And yet we will not give up the foolishness of welcoming the stranger. The child, the refugee. The foolishness of doing justice, loving mercy, walking humbly with God, this foolishness is our birth right. Our freedom.

Not to be seduced by the ethics of scarcity. That would teach us to protect and defend. But to be willing to risk following this one, Jesus Christ, whose death seems foolishness to the wise, and whose resurrection frees the world.

This week, let the scripture be a lens through which you look at the people around you. Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly – yes. But humbly with God. Not with your head down keeping out of trouble, in other words, but head up. Looking for what work or words or blessing God may put into our hands.

And when, if, you ever feel like you have no voice. No wisdom, only foolishness or weakness, then friends – walking humbly means you turn to your left and right and borrow a voice from someone else. God does not ask us to be solitary heroes, but companions in this work. Those who break bread together.

And we will together walk into the next months, whatever comes. We will walk humbly, with strength, and use our lives to cross insurmountable bridges with this foolishness which is the love of God. Thank you Steven, for speaking these words today. And thank all of you for gathering to listen to the scripture; may we borrow its voice and let the Holy Spirit speak through each of us.