

Colossians 1.15-20

- I am always a little sceptical about the sayings of the Chinese, mostly because I can't read Chinese and check out their sayings for myself, but one that is widely repeated is the wish expressed by one person to another that they might live in 'interesting times.' So if I were to ask you this morning do you think you live in 'interesting times' (which we tend to interpret as a kind of British understatement for deeply challenging times) I wonder what you would say.
- Personally speaking I think I do live in 'interesting times' but would rather that they were a lot less interesting. The interesting times for me present a series of deeply puzzling things that happen in our social, political and cultural life both locally and globally. And I am sure if we were each to make a list of those puzzling things there would be much overlap but also some very individual items which derive from the particular challenges that we have faced through our lives. Our upbringing too plays a part, how we see the world affects how puzzled we are. For instance, I know many people who find the evil perpetrated by one person on another very puzzling but I find that I do not, in fact I think very often I find unexpected goodness much more of a challenge to understand, even if it is also a delight.
- So by way of example, one of the great challenges of our age is to try and grasp what is happening in the world of social media. It is clearly changing people and it is clearly doing great damage as well as being, sometimes, a force for good. How does one navigate that space? I read a theological paper on the matter this week and found it helpful but was still left with the question of what if anything can be done about it to shape the use of it in a healthier direction. Do we have the will, the ideas, the power to change it?
- Or take another example this week. The collapse of several trials of those accused of sexual assault which prompted an immediate review of all cases due to come to trial. How is it possible to do justice both for victims and for alleged perpetrators? Our system seems incapable of it at the moment; the victims are being terribly failed in their quest for justice and innocent people are having their lives profoundly disrupted too. The world is a deeply puzzling place.
- Now my observation is that as human beings we respond in several different ways to living in 'interesting times' when things happen around us and to us that we simply cannot understand. One way is to bury our head in the sand and hope it all goes away, or at the very least that I can get through my allotted span without having to deal with it. If I narrow my vision of the world to my family, to the immediate and to what is local perhaps I can cope and survive.
- Some Christians I've observed have another approach. They know the world

needs to be understood through reference to God but find their understanding of God to be inadequate in the face of the challenge. What do we do when our Sunday School version of God isn't able to interpret what we find happening around us? The tension builds and builds until either we implode or we lose our faith and bomb out in favour of another explanation. John Hull, the wonderful blind professor of religion in Birmingham, who it was a privilege to know, understood this problem well and saw it as the single most serious issue in preventing Christian adults from growing.

- There's a third group of people who seek to engage with the world around them and understand it. I had a wonderful friend called Godfrey in my last parish who was always keen to discuss the puzzling thing of the moment, he was a great conversation partner. After the Brexit vote and with the deep sense of despair and uncertainty that followed I remember saying to Katharine, 'You know what I really need is a conversation with Godfrey.' I talk to think, so I knew that a chat would have helped.
- Of course such a chat might help me feel better but what we really need, and which so often seems to us to be in such short supply, is wisdom. Wisdom is a word that didn't occur in our short passage from Colossians this morning but it is the idea that lies behind all that Paul has to say about Jesus here. In v9 (which we didn't read) Paul prays that the Colossians may be filled with 'the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding' and later on in chapter 2, verse 3 he prays that they may have the 'knowledge of God's mystery, that is Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.' The passage we read is Paul's understanding of how God has answered and continues to answer his prayer for wisdom for the Colossian Christians. And wow! It is a stunning piece of poetry that, let's face it, doesn't hold anything back. There is here not a shred of reticence or understatement.
- I'm tempted at this point to recite the story of the vicar who goes into the Sunday School to tell the children a story and says to them 'I want to tell you a story about something that lives in the woods, has a red bushy tail and likes to eat nuts.' Does anyone know who that is? After a long pause, the little boy puts up his hand and says, 'I know the answer should be Jesus but it sure sounds like a squirrel to me.' Paul here is, if you like, telling us how Jesus is the answer to the prayer for wisdom, even if at first the early Christians hadn't understood him in that way, hadn't made the connection.
- So how does Paul do this? Well what it looks like he is doing is taking a word that occurs right in the middle of the poem and exploring the many facets of meaning that that word has. The word here is 'head' in English and in Hebrew, the language that Paul was probably thinking in, as in English, 'head' is a word that has multiple meanings. So just think about it for a moment. In English I can talk about the 'head' of the Junior School, the head of a river, the head of a tortoise, the head of a pint of beer, the head of a coin or, if you can remember that far back, the

head of a cassette recorder, the part that actually reads the magnetic imprint of the tape.

- So here Paul says that Jesus is the head of the body. He is the firstborn. He has supremacy. He is the beginning. All those words, head, firstborn, supreme, beginning are facets of meaning of the Hebrew word for head. And the way Hebrew poetic forms work is that in a three verse poem such as this it is the middle verse that contains the central idea or ideas and here the first and third verses parallel one another in support. Those words for head are all there in the middle verse.
- Let's think for a moment about some of those words. One of the things that really annoys me about sloppy journalism is how you hear people saying that the Queen is the head of the Church of England. So there I was watching Songs of Praise on the BBC the other Sunday when they televised the Scripture Union's hundredth anniversary service in St Mary's Islington at which the Queen was present. As she arrived in the car I could hear the commentator starting to explain what was happening, and for once, just for once, they gave her her proper title, the Supreme Governor of the Church of England. Hurrah! Except that of course that is a nonsense too! She is, in Paul's terms neither head nor supreme, only Jesus is that. In church politics and in church life generally we forget this at our peril, not least because once we forget who the boss is we forget to ask the boss what we should be about. Churches with poor prayer lives have almost always replaced the true head of the church with something or someone else. I don't know about your head, but my head issues instructions to the rest of me; and the church, the body of Christ, needs to know what the head is calling us to in a world of profound challenges and uncertainties.
- In Jewish understanding wisdom was one of the key ways of speaking about God creating the universe. Psalm 104.24 'O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.' Proverbs 3.19 'The LORD by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding he established the heavens.' Jeremiah speaks of the God who established the earth 'by his wisdom and by his understanding stretched out the heavens.' But here Paul takes that and applies it to Jesus. He writes of Jesus as the firstborn of creation and the firstborn from the dead, the beginning. Amazing language isn't it? He simply says Jesus is *the* beginning. What an extraordinary thing to say! But notice what's going on. He's not dismissing the past, he's saying that the whole purpose of all that has been, all that is and all that is to come is Christ himself. It doesn't matter where you look, where you start or what the question is the answer is Jesus. The scope of this passage is absolutely immense. It penetrates every corner of the known universe and every corner of the unknown universe, oh, and by the way, the heavens also. The heavens here being not the stars of the sky but the realm and domain of God's existence.
- And finally for Paul this wisdom of God, this supremacy of Jesus, this place, the

only place where we can understand ourselves and know the grace which accepts us and renews us and gives us life, is the cross. Even here as we focus down on this one central act of human and divine history Paul cannot help but speak of it in the greatest possible terms 'in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.'

- So whether we are head buryers in the sand or Sunday schoolers who have struggled to grow up, or those who need a chat to put the world to rights, all of us need find in Jesus the only true wisdom that exists in the universe. Surely that is what Paul is passionately, intensely and relentlessly pointing us towards.
- In a moment we will share in the bread and the wine of the peacemaking Jesus; the one who was pleased to reconcile us to himself will feed us the food we need that is the answer to Paul's prayer for wisdom, nothing less than Jesus Christ. Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. May his grace be with you. Amen.