

On Wisdom

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There is very little evidence that the Apostles had nicknames, although Jesus appears to have given one to St. Peter. He called him Rocky, and that for a rather serious reason. "Simon," he said, "I'm going to call you Rocky because it's on people with granite imaginations like yours that I will build my Church". And this is Good News by the way, because it means we all have a chance.

When you think of it, many of the Apostles had rôles that were attached to their names and by which they will be remembered until the world's (or the Church's) end. Matthew is always the tax collector, Simon always the Zealot, Judas the perennial traitor and the mysteriously un-named "Belovéd Disciple" whom tradition identifies as patron

of this parish and the author of the Fourth Gospel. Old no-name, whom Jesus loved.

The origin of names is sometimes very obvious. For example, for all the people now called Baker there was originally at least one who could bake bread. Once there was a Plumber who could actually change a washer. But that was a long time ago and now nobody expects people to identify with the names they bear. My friend John Falconer does not walk around with a large predatory bird attached to his wrist, and those people with truly arresting names like Sidebottom somehow manage to struggle through life without radical restorative surgery.

But whether your patron is the brother of James and one of the Sons of Thunder, or whether he is the one to whom Jesus entrusted the care of his mother and "the one Jesus loved" (and what a title to be remembered by this is!), whatever his identity your patron is irrevocably linked with the Gospel that bears his name, a work of poetic and structural genius and, more importantly, the most Catholic of all the Gospel records.

I say "catholic" because its reach is huge and inclusive, its Christ is not the Poor Man of Nazareth but the Lord of Heaven and Earth, the pre-existent Word and the incarnation of all Wisdom. Its central lens is the confession of Thomas – "My Lord and my God". And it's about this Wisdom that empties Thomas in its presence that I suggest we reflect this morning.

Like chastity, Wisdom is not only unpopular but deeply misunderstood in our culture. Like chastity, we caricature Wisdom so that we might be protected from its claim on us. So Wisdom becomes a synonym for being well-informed, or the ability to develop and maintain a smartness, a weapon against failure. It's another word for canny. When I was chaplain at the

University of Melbourne I felt great sympathy for those academics and students who had the uncomfortable feeling that they weren't attending of a *universitas* at all but a kind of finishing school for the consumer society. Many students left the university less universal minded than when they entered it. They had begun in the pursuit of wisdom and had learned instead techniques for getting by in the rat race. There was something emergingly gnostic about all this in the 1980s. It was the beginnings of the frank admission that we will be saved by what we know, and at least now our tertiary institutions tell the truth about themselves. When I taught at the University of Western Australia a few years ago, we didn't have students. We had clients - clients who were not learning the pursuit of wisdom so much as how to cast spells over an unruly future. As a piece of graffiti in Newcastle had it recently, "To be happy in life all you need is ignorance and self confidence".

But the deep wisdom of which the Fourth Gospel speaks is different. It has little to do with being well informed, in fact NOT knowing is something of a virtue for the wise in the same way as being a fool has nothing to do with IQ. No, the wisdom the author of the Fourth Gospel sees in Jesus is of a different order, a knowing we all hunger for, sometimes without knowing it

A constant theme of C. S. Lewis is a good example of this. Lewis had an argument for the existence and the reality of God that would fail every test of logic set for it, but which nevertheless has always impressed me by its wisdom and discernment. It is an argument from Inconsolable Longing and it goes like this. If every experience you have ever had leaves you in some sense dissatisfied, incomplete yet always longing for more – the memorable meal, the perfect love, the ecstatic vision, the unutterable beauty of the world – if there is *always* an element of disappointment in all the wonderful things of this world, then there is a strong chance that you were not really made for this world, but for another one. This home, the only home you've ever known, is not your true one.

It is this sense of desire *breeding* desire, rather than finding itself sated, that is so interesting. It is webbed throughout the Fourth Gospel and I think it is what St. John means by Wisdom. In the reading from Proverbs at this mass we heard the tradition that Wisdom sat beside God as he made the world. Wisdom is personified as a Woman and relates to the later, post-exilic tradition that God made the world, not principally for men and women, but for the Torah, the Sacred Law. The universe is primarily a cradle for the Law.

Your patron adds to this beautiful metaphor another dimension – that this Wisdom, this *Sophia*, has a human face, the beautiful face of Jesus Christ. This wisdom is revealed to us in Jesus' emptying of himself as St. Paul says and, as St. John the Evangelist has it,

"The Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us"

and it is this *pouring out* which is so inviting, so attractive. It is the opposite of so many things our culture admires and inculcates – control, personal reward and the unspeakable, slow and silent self-immolation that it produces. Dan Berrigan, the American Jesuit and peace activist, used to say, "In a consumer society, the last thing you consume is yourself".

The Christ of the Fourth Gospel has been somewhere else. He was Jesus of Nazareth for a while, but the Wisdom he incarnates transcends time. He

knows, and what he knows gathers us up with him. In St. John's Gospel this is stated in so many intriguing ways:

- He does not merely know about us. He know what was in Man, the Gospel says.
- "How do you know me?" asks Nathaniel. "I knew you before you knew yourself" Jesus replies.
- "You're only a nipper" the priests laughed at him. "Before Abraham was, I am" he replies
- "I am he," he says to the soldiers in Gethsemane and they collapse in this kind of presence.

This Christ knows how things will turn out. This Wisdom comes back from the dead.

In C. S. Lewis' *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* the two girls Lucy and Susan are mourning the death of Aslan when they hear a huge cracking noise like a giant breaking a giant's plate

"What are they doing to Aslan now?" cried Susan. "Is it more magic?"

" Yes!" said a great voice behind their backs. "It is more magic". They looked around and thee, shining in the sunrise, larger than they had seen him before, stood Aslan himself.

"What does it mean?" asked Lucy when they were somewhat calmer.

"It means," said Aslan, "that though the Witch knew the Deep Magic, there is a magic deeper still which she did not know. Her knowledge goes back to the dawn of time. But if she could have looked a little further back, into the stillness and the darkness before Time dawned, she would have read there a different incantation. She would have known that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor's stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backwards.

Then, in a tradition that extends from our cave-dwelling ancestors who summoned their prey by ritual movement, to the Greeks who called the wind on the plains of Troy, to the comedies of Shakespeare where new life is celebrated so often in the vows of marriage, Aslan and the children dance - not formally, but a dance of leaping and romping and of fierce communion.

I think it is the character of Wisdom never to do despairing or desperate things, especially with oneself, never to give up on oneself and never to give up on God. May this parish always witness to the deep magic of Christ the Lord who took our flesh, continues to take it in our neighbour and dwells amongst us.

Roger Sharr