

The Economy of Grace

Epiphany 2023

Isaiah 60:1-6

Ephesians 3:1-12

Matthew 2:1-12

"Because you're worth it" says the sultry actor's voice in an indulgent cosmetics commercial. "Because you're worth it," says St Paul, exuberant in his encouragement of one of the least powerful parts of the politically powerless church family a few decades after Christ rose from the dead and ascended to heaven. He's saying he doesn't mind being a prisoner of the Roman Empire because he was arrested as a political irritant while in the cause of bringing the good news of Christ to people outside his Jewish community. He's so emphatic he defies his captors by calling himself not their prisoner but "a prisoner *of* Christ," wittily showing the Emperor is not in control as much as he thinks he is. Why is Christianity such an irritant? Because it doesn't accept the mind-set of empire. When our translator uses the word "commission" for his message-bringing (v2) the word Paul writes is *oikonomia*: stewardship - the word that gives us the word economy. While the empire maintains a precarious power structure held together by violence and fear, Paul and the church he writes to dwell in an economy of grace.

We should imagine the vulnerability of him as prisoner and his readers as they are a tiny sect in the city dominated by the massive Temple of Diana. They might also feel marginalised within the Christian community as they were gentiles and so considered by some to be second class Christians. We should therefore feel the amazing dynamic energy in this letter. Our reading in Greek is a single sentence, almost breathless, as Paul makes two remarkable assertions. First, they are fully, entirely, top class Christians, not second rate, and he a Jewish Christian is glad to be a prisoner if it means they have become part of the family. Secondly, more amazingly, the very wisdom of God is made visible in the life of people like them: his church. (v10). Astonishingly, he describes how when God's Spirit breathes through the church, their lives make God's wisdom visible not only to the irritable empire, but to the heavenly authorities. This phrase includes both God and her Angels, and also any negative spiritual forces that might be at work in the universe. (see Ephesians 6:12.) It's easy to get unhealthily fascinated by such cosmology, but the important thing is the way such talk belittles earthly human powers and their fleeting regimes, bullying emperors, manipulative puppet kings, here today-gone tomorrow party leaders and tottering House of Representative speakers.

Think how moving it is for the vulnerable little church to hear that all the angels of heaven are watching them to see and learn what God's wisdom looks like when it is manifested in the complicated world, in the mundanity of daily life, in the feuds and anxieties of human discourse. In some ways, God's wisdom would hardly be visible in heaven. For it appears most vividly and movingly in crisis. Wisdom is most important and vibrant not when things go swimmingly, but when there are conflicts, dilemmas and confusion. This cosmology appears beautifully elsewhere, for example, when the angels rejoice as they give news to the shepherds; or when Jesus speaks of them rejoicing over the repentance of a single sinner. God's love is admired and celebrated in heaven precisely when it is refracted in the earthly life of confused and conflicted but faithful people.

The wisdom of God that inspires the economy of grace does not always look wise to the world. Nor does it always look the same.

As Archbishop Tutu chaired the Truth and Reconciliation Commission a police officer described how he had beaten to death a young black man, whose mother listened taking in every sordid

detail. When he had finished, without promising it could come about, as was their habit the Commission invited her to say what she hoped for in response, the mother said she wanted to know where her Son's body was. Then, she said she hoped the beleaguered white man before her would accept that she treat him as a son in the place of the one she had lost. Imagine the silence of the angels in heaven witnessing this manifestation of the wisdom of God in the darkest earthly reality. Imagine, better still, the bewildered confusion of any malevolent heavenly powers that sought destruction, now helpless as the economy of grace was asserted.

In a Ugandan court, young judge, John Sentamu deliberately judged a man guilty of a crime he did not commit. He committed this act of injustice because he knew the charges were trumped up by Amin's thugs and if found innocent he or his family would immediately be killed. He recorded the verdict but managed to arrange his release by other means shortly afterwards. Eventually, after his own imprisonment and beating, Sentamu himself judged the danger so great he took his wife to Britain on the pretext of attending a conference and sought assylum. It's hard to measure his influence on the confidence of the church in Africa since.

Again, imagine the angels frowning at first, then maybe their wry smiles as they witness a young Christian man trying to discern not only what was just, but what was wise in this most conflicted world. Imagine any malevolent heavenly forces feeling tricked, their authority bleeding away.

In both circumstances, what might be fair or safe was overwhelmed by a wisdom, a grace, that subverts the economy of competition and survival and even of justice with something that changes the game and makes room for flourishing. Both were differently disruptive of the economy of revenge and the economy of dictatorship.

We can see why in Paul's lavish words, God's wisdom is visible in its "Great Variety" - a glorious word here could mean: manifold, comprehensive, complex, richly diversified, many-splendoured, multi-patterned; multi-coloured. God's wisdom is not linear. It is not a long list of good things, right decisions or correct answers. Manifest in the life of the faithful, it will of course appear sometimes contradictory, hard to pin down, impossible to codify. But it will be visible when grace changes situations, from the rebuilding of a nation after disaster as in Isaiah's Israel and Tutu's South Africa, or or an ordinary Christian's life in Ephesus, or in the little family in a terraced street where someone has the grace to reach out to step children or a parent's new partner or someone displaces their hurt at betrayal with a generosity that will make new things possible for the family.

When young Elizabeth Windsor was crowned seventy years ago people spoke of a new "Elizabethan age" a complimentary assertion that she will put such an authoritative mark on our culture that we will speak of "the days of Queen Elizabeth." Indeed, it turns out the historians who will tell the story of our era probably will. When Matthew, from the same comedic school as Paul, speaks of "the days of King Herod" it is amusingly to set up expectation that Herod was in charge only, immediately, to show how little he was in control.

Visitors from the Eastern lands - home of longstanding enemies of Israel, bought gifts for a new born king. We do not know how much they knew about the Jewish faith, but they knew enough to make the visit seem worthwhile. To take gifts affirming Jewish authority was an act of grace after years of enmity. They paid the child homage, with powerfully symbolic cross-cultural gifts. Matthew using the same word he uses for the disciples worshipping Jesus at the Ascension at the end of the gospel. The economy of grace crosses cultural boundaries. Their religious curiosity and their overwhelming joy and openness to dreams contrasts the fear, secrecy and manipulation, and later fury, that characterises Herod's life. In him we see on earth the reaction of the malevolent heavenly powers that feel threatened and helpless when ordinary human beings inhabit the economy of grace and seem not to be cowed by their violence.

Hearing the story afresh today, we might ask God, as in the time of Isaiah, to prepare our hearts for what seems a distant dream now: a day when visitors from Eastern lands with whom there is enmity now may come knowing us better than we know ourselves and bringing gifts of wisdom and grace.

It may not look fair in the world's economy to spend hard earned law abiding tax payers' money on the education and rehabilitation of offenders. But it might be wise. It may not be reasonable for the mother to embrace the child her husband fathered when unfaithful to her. But she might be wise, gracious, expanding her heart and re-configuring her family, making their world bigger and more interesting, teaching her own children what it is to welcome a new sibling. It may not be fair or just for a gay ordinand to give the church another chance, but it may be healing for the church, as with the overwhelming of racism by wise Windrush Anglicans. It may not be sensible in the world's eyes to host refugees and process their applications when we've enough to worry about economy and security...not sensible? But maybe wise. (One of them might even become Archbishop of York.)

Here at home, if we feel daunted by Tutu and Sentamu, we might remember Paul's word was for the small group of ordinary Ephesians rather in need of encouragement about their identity. Moreover, that God's wisdom be many splendoured, full of variety, means that we can wonder at the way someone else manifests the economy of Grace, but we are not obliged to manifest it in the same way or the same degree. Its pattern will be different in all our lives. The important thing to remember is that in God's economy of grace, wisdom takes shape and everyone is worth it.