



“Stuff... and Nonsense”

Proverbs 1: 1-7 & 1 Corinthians 1: 18-25

There is, unfortunately, some expectation that the sermon on Picnic Sunday will be a little lighter or even light-hearted. We must not of course be foolish, because as that reading from Proverbs said, “fools despise wisdom and instruction”. And yet, as we heard St Paul say in the Second Lesson, things are not always as they seem. Much of what Christians believe does seem like foolishness to those who think themselves wise, but, he asked, “has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?”.

In 1846 Edward Lear published “A Book of Nonsense”, a volume of limericks which opened with

*There was an Old Man with a beard,
Who said, "It is just as I feared!—
Two Owls and a Hen,
Four Larks and a Wren,
Have all built their nests in my beard!"*

It led to a succession of nonsensical songs and poems, the most famous must be about “The owl and the pussycat” who went to sea “in a beautiful pea-green boat. They took some honey and plenty of money, wrapped up in a five pound note”.

That clearly is nonsense, and of course many people today think that religion is also nonsense. It doesn’t make sense. Only fools would believe it. But maybe we shouldn’t rush to conclusions.

Take science, for example. People used to believe that God created the world in six days and then took Sunday off. Clearly, nonsense. Now we believe that everything came into being at the Big Bang. Nearly fourteen billion years ago something came out of nothing and that something includes the universes which stretch to infinity and the unbelievable complexity of the smallest atomic particle. And all of this

happened by chance. The Oxford mathematician Roger Penrose has calculated that the probability of the emergence of a life-giving cosmos is as close to zero as anyone has ever imagined. The probability is much, much smaller than you winning the lottery jackpot every day for more days than the universe has been in existence. And all without God. Sense, or nonsense?

The second limerick in Lear's collection featured a young lady from Ryde. Although I much prefer a more modern version

*There was a young lady of Ryde
Who ate a bad apple and died
The apple fermented
Her inside lamented
And made cider inside her inside.*

Later this morning we have a baptism. His name is Asher. It used to be said that babies who died unbaptised went to hell or at least to a place called Limbo. Now that's clearly nonsense because God isn't like that. Jesus said "Let the children come to me and forbid them not, for such is the Kingdom of Heaven". These days people are more likely to say: leave it until they're older and can decide for themselves. Do they also say: we don't give the baby milk in case she wants to be a Vegan? Or we don't teach him Right and Wrong because he may want to become an Anarchist? Sense or nonsense?

*A wonderful bird is the pelican
His bill holds more than his belican
He can take in his beak
Enough food for a week
But I'm dammed if I see how the hell he can.*

We live in a world which believes that the more material goods you amass the happier you will be. Now we know that is nonsense. But we still believe it, and every marketing ploy, every TV advert, manipulates and exploits it. This car, as a status or even a sex symbol, this face cream "because you're worth it". But in reality what will make little Asher, who we're baptising this morning, happy is the love of his parents and the knowledge that he is not only their child but he is also a child of God. That's what makes sense.

Here's one from a book entitled "Limericks for clever people", so you'll have to laugh even if you don't get it.

*A forgetful old gasman named Dieter
Who went poking around his gas heater
Touched a leak with his light;
He blew out of sight –
And as everyone who knows anything about poetry will tell you he also ruined
the meter.*

We often think that we could establish peace and justice in the world if other people stopped behaving badly. And we like to think that makes sense. But could it be that we are as much part of the problem as anyone else? Maybe even more so, especially those of us who have power, because we live in the West, because we have choice, because where we work and hold power we exercise much more influence than most other people? But do we dare to even ask if that makes sense? Quick, another limerick.

*One Saturday morning at three
A cheese-monger's shop in Patee
Collapsed to the ground
With a thunderous sound
Leaving only a pile of de brie*

People used to believe that they needed God, because they couldn't make it on their own. Now we can all laugh at such foolishness. For we have become self-sufficient. We can sort ourselves out without any need for a God. And as for a God who loves us so much that he's willing to die for us, surely that's a nonsense we can now forget? Or is the truth nearer what St Paul called the foolishness of God? A God to whom we can confess our sins and our doubts, a God who accepts us as we are, a God who will help us to become much better than we could hope, a God who calls us to work with him to build a world of justice and peace?

*There is an old bishop at Gray's
Who preaches and prattles and prays
His time has all gone
But he keeps on and on
And though he should stop he just stays.*

But not today. Thanks be to God. Amen.