Sermon for 24th in Ordinary Year B

Readings: Proverbs 1:20-33; James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-35

i

As I write this I am listening to an account on the radio of the Profumo affair and of how the liaison started when the Tory MP spotted a naked Christine Keeler in a swimming pool. The short affair proved the downfall of Profumo’s political career and Keeler was part of the collateral damage. It’s a telling example of the power of sexual attraction that has been the joy and the despair of many a life, just ask Harvey Weinstein.

Industry knows the power of sex and uses it to sell everything from shampoo to cars. We keep falling for it because sexual attraction is such a powerful force in our lives. If the worst it does is lead us to buy a car we don’t really need, then we’ve got off lightly, but from Helen of Troy and David’s lust for Bathsheba, sex has been the downfall of many a promising career.

Christians have to be very careful when they talk about sexual matters as the Church has held some very puritanical and repressed views over the years, often leading to misplaced guilt for purely natural feelings and in many instances leading to misogynistic attitudes that have harmed the natural interaction between men and women.

The Church affirms the goodness of appropriate sexual activity, and acknowledges the power of such emotional and physical needs which few of us can live without satisfying, but when our sexual appetite is allowed to go unbridled as to over-ride normal moral constraints then normal sexual appetite has turned into lust, which is sinful.

In our reading from *Proverbs* today, the power of sexual attraction is being used as a metaphor for seeking the will of God. In the first 9 chapters of *Proverbs* we are introduced to two competing attractive women: Lady Wisdom and Mistress Folly. Lady Wisdom is the way of committed, long-term fulfilment – assuming that sustained effort is required to build a healthy and long-term marriage which leads ultimately to greater fulfilment. Whereas Mistress Folly, like the attractions of taking a mistress, may offer easy, short-term enjoyment, but is offering nothing deeper or more meaningful, and therefore will prove ultimately to offer less fulfilment.

The image of the disciplined approach to sexual fulfilment as exemplified in building a marriage represents the sort of approach required in life to find true wisdom and spiritual fulfilment. The discipline and restraint of the Church and of faith traditions may initially appear not worth the bother; attending Church rather than going to the beach or the football may seem to be a less attractive choice, but *Proverbs* is suggesting that ultimately the discipline is worth it.

Going to the beach, the shopping mall or the football may superficially look more immediately attractive, but ultimately will prove less fulfilling.

ii

The message is pretty much the same in today’s passage from James 3:1-12. We are urged to guard against the easy, quick, superficial response. Once our words are spoken they are so very difficult to take back and most of us will recall occasions when we have been guilty of an over-hasty comment or criticism which has hurt people far more than we would have intended. The *Letter of James* urges us, in a similar vein to the *Proverbs* passage, to show some restraint and to think about the longer term. It is better not to speak at all than to regret the words that pass our lips.

St Paul numbers self-control as one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit. This passage from *James* follows the same argument. It speaks of the “perfect” person who can hold the whole body in check (v2). The tongue, though small in relation to the whole body, in the same way as a rudder is a small part of the ship, or the bit in the horse’s mouth is so much smaller than the creature it controls, so the tongue has an effect on our life far exceeding its relative size.

Taming the tongue, as verse 8 puts it, or putting our brain in gear before we speak, in modern parlance, is something we all have so much trouble in doing. Even those of us who praise God can still curse others and blaspheme with the next breath.

*James* urges us to make ourselves consistent Christians, striving to be like a stream that cannot bring forth both fresh and salt water. So we should behave all of the time according to our better, higher aspirations. When we let ourselves down it is often as a result of what we say. If only we could hold our tongue and think more carefully before we start, if only we could take the longer view, rather than allow our emotions to give vent to a torrent of ill-thought out rantings.

Few of us in the life of the Church will commit grievous sins; but often what we say falls far short of the standards we espouse. Take control; do not give in to unbridled emotions; put the brain in gear before speaking out. It’s a bit of advice we could all do with taking to heart. We often let ourselves down not by what we do, but by what we say.

iii

In Mark 8:27-35 we see this affliction even affects St Peter. In this short episode we see both Lady Wisdom and Mistress Folly at work.

When Jesus asks who the disciples think that he is, Peter has had many months to think about the matter. He has heard what others have been saying. Yet having reflected for himself, Peter is prepared to go further than many and say: “You are the Christ!” This is the fruit of Lady Wisdom.

Jesus then goes on to speak for the first time (in Mark) of his suffering, rejection and death when he goes to Jerusalem. Peter immediately blurts out his opposition to such a scheme. This is Mistress Folly at work. Peter has given himself no time at all to digest such a plan, to think about it or ask questions about it. He simply comes out with what at first sight is the more attractive option, more effective path to being the Messiah. And for Peter, that does not include suffering, rejection and death.

How odd; if only he had just stopped a moment to think about it. He has just claimed that Jesus is the Messiah and now he assumes Jesus doesn’t know how to be the Messiah. Poor Peter has allowed his tongue to speak the words of the devil in tempting Jesus to run away from his suffering. Peter could have done with James’ later advice to control the tongue and to think before he spoke.

For God’s wisdom is not the same as human wisdom. The nature of God is mystery and requires dedicated effort to understand.

How many more people down the ages have been too quick to decide what they think about Jesus. There is no greater need for the steady, long-term pursuit of truth, such as personified in Lady Wisdom, than when it comes to searching out the meaning of life. Yet so often we meet people who have given more thought to which car they buy than they have given to thinking seriously about the existence of God.

So many say they do not believe in God, as if it were a trifling matter that can be decided upon a whim, in a blink of an eye. They have gone for the immediate allure of Mistress Folly; with her there is no requirement to defend one’s lack of faith in today’s secular society. God is dismissed by people who have never seriously thought about it. It may be fashionable to think that way, but *Proverbs*, *James* and the example of St Petersuggest such a momentous question deserves a long and careful consideration.

A hasty rejection may have everlasting repercussions, after all.

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