

Advent Reflection for the Second Sunday before Advent (17.11.19)

'O Wisdom'

Proverbs 8:22-36

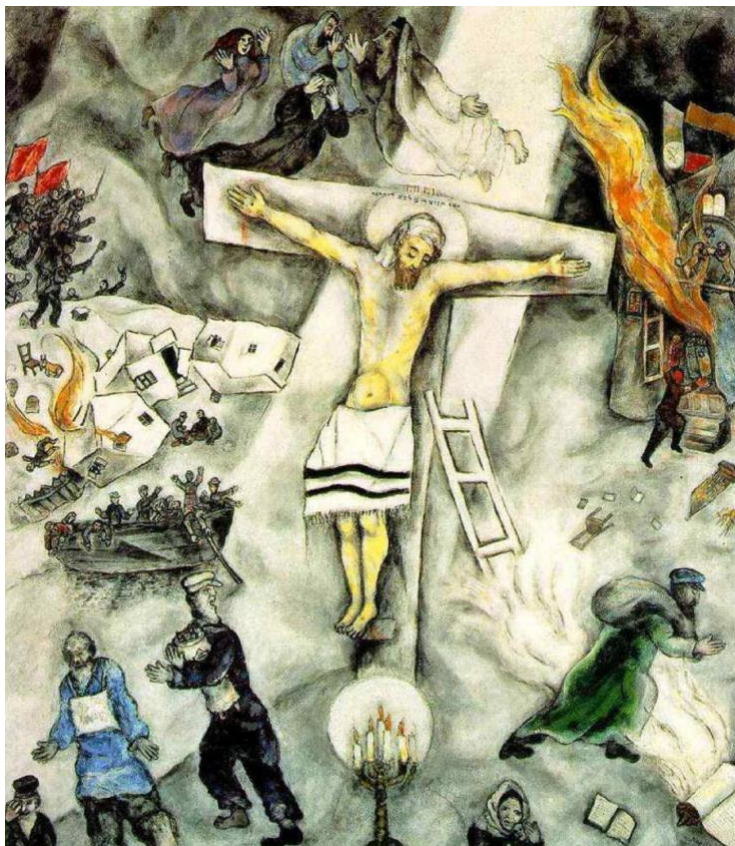
1 Corinthians 2:6-13

In the coming few weeks we shall be focusing our attention in our morning worship on themes raised in the ancient 'O Antiphons', best known to most of us, perhaps, from the various verses of the traditional Advent hymn 'O come, O come, Immanuel'.

The first antiphon is 'O Sapientia' – O Wisdom, and in its traditional version it reads like this:

O Wisdom, coming forth from the mouth of the Most High,
reaching from one end to the other mightily,
and sweetly ordering all things:
Come and teach us the way of prudence.

Each Sunday in the coming few weeks we shall allow an interplay between words, images and silence to aid our reflection on the themes of Advent. Today our chosen image is Marc Chagall's 'White Crucifixion' (1938).



What Chagall shows us here is not a world 'sweetly ordered', but one of intense human suffering. A very specific time and place of suffering in fact.

In July 1937 Adolf Hitler opened an exhibition of 'Degenerate Art' in Munich. Art which was mostly in the modernist style, rather than the more crudely realist styles favoured by the Nazis – depicting blond haired, muscular youths and maidens, ploughing fields, or working in foundries, or generally doing whatever was understood by Nazi ideology to be a good, Aryan, patriotic sort of thing to do.

'Degenerate art', on the other hand, had little time for the myths and dream of political white supremacists. It was art that showed the world, and especially the world's brokenness, in ways that were striking and sometimes shocking. Art that challenged the certainties and the conservatism of dominant assumptions, dominant ways of seeing things, and dominant political regimes. Art that refused to be confined in its vision to the official version of things. Art more concerned with the pursuit of truth than sentimentality and crude propaganda.

And *Jewish* artists in particular, of course, found their work (and themselves) mocked and derided. And, as we know, that was just the beginning of an awful history of derision, dehumanization, and destruction. A history that was already beginning to unfold, and whose direction was already clear to anyone not determined to look away, or determined to adhere to the official version of things.

Well, Marc Chagall was a Jew. A Russian Jew living now in France. And his works had already made quite an impact on an art world of which Paris and Berlin were now the acclaimed centres. So, it's unsurprising to discover that several of Chagall's paintings were prominently displayed in that Munich exhibition, and, for him as for so many others, the writing was already on the wall. Get out, or face the terrors of the approaching darkness.

What *is* perhaps surprising, though, is that in responding to all this Chagall found himself drawn, in this painting and others, to a central Christian symbol. The symbol of the crucified Christ who is also, of course, for the New Testament writers and according to Jesus himself, the crucified Messiah – the very embodiment of Jewish hope and expectation, the core of God's promise to Israel, here seemingly all come to nothing, handed over to the powers and dominions of the world, ending, as all good things eventually do, in the squall of suffering and death, the universal human condition from which not even the accomplishments of anesthetic or strategies for a 'dignified death' can or will ever deliver us. There is nothing dignified about *any* death, whenever and however death comes. Because human beings were not made for death, and so death always robs us of our true humanity, including our human dignity. That's one thing that the symbol of crucifixion—of our humanity taken and broken through injustice, suffering, cruelty and death—tells us. It was not meant to be like this. It is not meant to be like this.

And, haunted or tormented by this symbol, as he depicts the darkening world of late 1930s Europe, Chagall thrusts this very same symbol into the midst of that world; a world of Jewish suffering, a world being gradually drained of light and colour, gradually receding into the valley of the shadow of death. And, perhaps with irony, perhaps not, Chagall replaces

the traditional loin cloth, decorously placed on more or less all paintings of Christ crucified (in reality victims of crucifixion were nailed up entirely naked), with a Jewish prayer shawl – an in-your-face gesture that refuses to allow us to forget the Jewishness of Jesus himself, a rabbi, a descendant of King David, and (if Christians were right) the one God sent into the world to rescue God's people. The symbol of shared human suffering, failure and despair, in other words, here becomes again a very precise question posed by a Jewish artist, about the goodness and wisdom of Israel's own God: the God of whom Proverbs speaks as the fount of all wisdom and truth and understanding, ordering creation well and 'sweetly', as the antiphon has it. What sort of wisdom is this? the painting seems to demand to know.

Let's take a moment or two now in silence to dwell on what we see, allowing the painting to work on us as it speaks in its own, non-verbal but powerful language.

SILENCE.

One of the things that has struck me about this painting is the way in which some of the vignettes of human plight and pain leap disconcertingly straight out of the particular world Chagall himself was immersed in and find sharp resonances in our own headlines, and our experience of the way the world still is. Look at that little boat, crammed to the gun-whales with frightened and desperate people, their bid to escape from death threatening instead to become the means of their own demise. How many times in recent days, weeks, months has that same scene been played out in the waters of the North Sea, or the Mediterranean? And it's not much of a stretch, is it, from Chagall's boat to the refrigerated lorries travelling across Europe and boarding ferries even as we sit here this morning.

There is no clever answer to the awfulness of suffering and death in God's world. Anyone who tries to provide one has either failed to grasp the enormity of such suffering, or else missed the point of the deep questions that, for people of faith, people who believe God to be good and wise, loving and all-powerful, the extent of that suffering (the long history of terrors and horrors that encompasses *every* age, including our own) is sooner or later bound to pose.

There is no clever answer. But there is an answer of sorts, albeit one which, as the Apostle Paul reminds us in the opening chapters of 1 Corinthians, is never going to commend itself to those who demand and will only be satisfied by clever answers; because it's one that we will never be able, as we say, to get our heads around. Not in a month of Sundays. And probably not even were we given all the Sundays in eternity to work on it.

The wisdom of God, Paul suggests, is not restricted to the unrivalled draughtsmanship and craftsmanship involved in creating a world like ours, with all its beauty and complexity and wonder; though no doubt we see it reflected there too. But the wisdom of God, Paul insists, is much bigger, much deeper than any mere divine brilliance. Because it encompasses, too, the knowledge of how to deal with a world which, as ours has, goes seriously wrong and in which ugliness, pain and downright evil have flared up like a virus in such a way as to infect and corrupt the whole, leaving none of it as it really should be.

But this wisdom, the *true* wisdom of God which, Paul tells us, was hidden through the ages, even though it 'decreed what must happen before the ages, for our glory' (v.7), is much more than intellectual prowess to the power of 'n', and not the sort of thing that can be learned up, or written in books, or worked out through some divine calculus – the sort of thing that really clever people like the people who work in universities aspire to, even though (if they're not seriously deluded) they know they will never attain it.

No – the true wisdom of God, Paul tells us, is the wisdom of action rather than mere intellect. It is the understanding of how to respond when the world goes seriously awry and is engulfed in evil and suffering. And it involves God getting God's hands dirty, and taking the worst that evil and suffering are able to inflict on anyone, and wrestling with them and submitting to them, in order, finally, to defeat them. It is, in other words, the cross – the crucified Jesus who is himself none other than the one through whom all things were made – who is the true wisdom of God, revealed at last in flesh and blood form to accomplish the world's redemption and do what has to be done 'for our glory', for our sharing in God's own glory. For it is that, and not suffering and death, for which we were made.

Perhaps that's why, in Chagall's toying with the significance of the crucifixion for his own angst in the face of the suffering of the Jewish people under the 3rd Reich, and, undoubtedly, the suffering of all people, all sentient creatures, in a world which seems at the last to be utterly indifferent to their well-being, and yet comes to us as a gift from the hand of a God who is good, and merciful, and all powerful – perhaps that's why Chagall depicts that single shaft of light breaking in from above, interrupting the growing shadows, cascading on and illuminating the pain and despair of this Jew, this man, who is yet so much more than either of those things. And who, because he is more, because he is none other than God's own response to our sin and our pain and our death, provides a vital glimpse of hope, a glimpse of a promise as yet still hidden from our view, a glimpse of something for which we must wait, and suffer the anguish of waiting itself. The waiting that is at the very heart of the season of Advent. Waiting for the Coming God. Waiting for the one who has promised, 'Tomorrow, I will come...'

We're going now to hear the words of poet Malcolm Guite in the first of his series of sonnets based on the O Antiphons. As you listen, go back to the painting again for another look. And we'll take a further brief pause for silent reflection, before moving on to the next part of our service.

O Sapientia. (O Wisdom)

I cannot think unless I have been thought,
Nor can I speak unless I have been spoken;
I cannot teach except as I am taught,
Or break the bread except as I am broken.
O Mind behind the mind through which I seek,
O Light within the light by which I see,
O Word beneath the words with which I speak,
O founding, unfound Wisdom, finding me,
O sounding Song whose depth is sounding me,
O Memory of time, reminding me,
My Ground of Being, always grounding me,
My Maker's bounding line, defining me:

Come, hidden Wisdom, come with all you bring,
Come to me now, disguised as everything.

(Malcolm Guite)

SILENCE