

May I speak in the name of God, Giver, Forgiver and Lover. Amen.

“If I had a world of my own, everything would be nonsense. Nothing would be what it is, because everything would be what it isn't. And contrariwise, what it is, it wouldn't be, and what it wouldn't be, it would. You see?”

Some of you may have recognized those words as coming from the Disney production of Lewis Carroll's masterpiece *Alice in Wonderland*. Even generations after he wrote it, Carroll's book continues to delight readers with its whimsical nonsense. And yet there is a serious side to all this nonsense, as comedians and writers have always known. Nonsense helps us access the truth. It cuts through the barriers and artificial constructs of respectable society. It gives us a way of seeing the world that is unconventional, but it relies on an understanding of convention. Nonsense is of course a not so distant cousin of madness. But it is also self-aware.

It seems to me that one of the most dangerous temptations for biblical interpreters has been to come to the scripture as if *none* of it were nonsense. Sometimes we listen to scripture and we pontificate about the meaning in a terribly serious way. We wonder what it is meant to mean. When in actual fact there are sometimes when we simply need to recognize it as nonsense.

Some of us were brought up to believe that there is always some golden nugget of meaning hidden away out of plain sight behind the text of scripture. And in the

history of theology there have been all sorts of weird and wonderful spins put on some of the more difficult passages of scripture. The true problem here is not with scripture of course. Its with us. For if we insist on coming to the scriptures as if they are a humorless instruction manual we will never appreciate the true nonsense of scripture.

One of the more trusted figures in the medieval court, at least in Shakespeare's medieval courts, was the jester or the fool. As the fool he, and it most often it was a bloke, he could say pretty much anything and get away with it. Which meant that so long as he said it in a comic way, he could communicate the most serious of messages to the king. While others saying something similar might find themselves short of a head, the fool was protected, at least theoretically, by his foolishness.

And then there were itinerant holy fools. Wise men and women who lived vagrant lives. To the outside world they were foolish, for they possessed little, but to the eyes of the medieval church they modeled Christ. In their poverty they possessed something utterly priceless. And in the nonsense they spoke, the church discerned portals to another world, a world of divine truths.

Today we need to recover the power of nonsense. We need to learn from the holy fools and from Alice in Wonderland. And we need to recognize the nonsensical within scripture as a channel - and not a barrier - to God.

It is nonsense to claim that the last will be first and the first will be last. But it is also a profound spiritual truth.

Just as it is nonsense to eat and drink with someone - and then claim that you have not. Its nonsense to make a pact with death, as Isaiah notes, just as it is nonsense to believe that God is going to destroy the land. The closer you look at the bible, in fact, a veritable profusion of nonsense appears. And while some may be risible, some may be spiritually profound.

The question it seems to me is to how one can discern between the stark raving mad nonsense, and the spiritually challenging nonsense that reveals divine truth. If I could offer you a fool proof way of dividing the two from each other I would be two things: one, a con artist, and two, immensely rich. And while there are those who have succeeded in translating the inscrutable nonsense of the bible into words that are marketable, they have done a great disservice to the tradition of biblical nonsense.

If biblical nonsense has any meaning, and I hope you see by now that it does, it is to challenge each one of us to do the thinking for ourselves. It is precisely when we scratch our heads and wonder that God is able to speak to us. And if for one moment we think we understand what we are hearing, then we need to undergo some rigorous self-examination.

One wonders for instance what it might mean for Paul to talk about receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken? Kingdoms shake, they teeter and fall. All of the great empires have fallen, and even in our age the mightiest powers have shown their vulnerability. It simply does not make sense to talk about an unshakeable kingdom, at

least not in any empirical sense. As if to underscore this inbuilt tendency of kingdoms to fall apart in *Alice in Wonderland* the Queen of hearts rules over an extraordinarily shaky kingdom of cards.

And yet as our presence here testifies, surely there is something in this Pauline nonsense of an unshakeable kingdom? If there is, it has to be quite unlike anything else that we have known.

The psalmist of course is also guilty of nonsense, not least in proclaiming that God makes war to cease in all the world. But is that not a nonsense that we desire to make true? And is the psalmist not a little like the court jester, allowing the truth to hide in plain sight?

Clearly we all have a choice to make. We can dismiss all that I have said as nonsense and we can go back to looking for the elusive true meaning of scripture. Or we can embrace the nonsense of God. A nonsense that liberates us from the false reasoning of the world. A nonsense that makes sense because like Alice it is a child of incautious love. And if God asks us anything it is to continue to practice incautious love. Amen.