

3 before Lent Year A 2020

In 2014 Eugene Goostman, a chatbot with artificial intelligence, posed as a 13-year-old Ukrainian boy. And for five minutes this disguised robot conversed with judges from the Royal Society. At the end of that time 33% of the judges thought they had been talking, not with a robot, but with a human being. Despite the huge development in A.I. that represents, one scientist suggested in a recent article that work on artificial intelligence has come to a crossroads. The problem is that A.I. has no way of checking its deductions against accumulated human experience – what we would call common sense. That means AI has the potential to make catastrophic mistakes in, say, giving a medical diagnosis or while controlling a driver-less car.

But if we were looking for a source of accumulated common-sense for a chatbot then one place we might begin is with the OT book of Proverbs from which our first reading came this morning. For Proverbs is largely a collection of sayings that have grown out of the observation of human behaviour. This collection of human wisdom does, of course, reflect its time and culture. It tends to be hierarchical with proverbs about rulers

and those in positions of power such as this: “By justice a king gives stability to the land, but one who makes heavy exactions ruins it (29: 4) – an interesting take on austerity. Proverbs is also patriarchal and at least once a year weekday evensong is enlivened by the proverb: “A nagging wife is like water dripping endlessly.” (NEB 19:13) We don’t hear much in return about the failings of husbands although there is quite a lot about the foolhardiness of men who are lazy, gluttonous or drunkards.

To characterise Proverbs, though, as only a book of wise human sayings would be quite wrong. We are left in no doubt that true wisdom comes from God. For instance, in a purple passage in chapter eight we are told that wisdom was present with God, taking delight in the world, as it was created. In fact, wisdom is described as a master worker, a co-creator with God, effecting order and pattern in the world. And in giving wisdom divine character Proverbs paved the way for St. Paul to personify Jesus as the wisdom of God in his First Letter to the Corinthians. In today’s passage from that same letter Paul says that the wisdom he teaches is not of this age but is the wisdom of God revealed to us in the word and work of the crucified Jesus. What, then, does this wisdom of Jesus look like? Is it entirely different from the wisdom of this age that we have heard about in the book of Proverbs?

Well, the wisdom of Jesus is certainly different from the patriarchal and hierarchical structures of Proverbs. Jesus took a little child, someone with no status in first century family or society, and said, “whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it”. Perhaps even more shocking for his audience he suggested that masters have no privileges over their slaves because He, our Lord and Master, came among us as one who serves. Indeed, Jesus not only became a servant but became as one accursed and helpless as he died on the cross that we might live. And this reversal of status and power seems like folly to human wisdom which is why St. Paul talks of the foolishness of God being wiser than the wisdom of humanity.

The need for Christians to abandon a sense of status and honour was something the Spanish saint Teresa of Avila wrote about a great deal. And the reason is that for Teresa the early disciples, men and women, represent an ideal Christian community which we are to emulate. They were a group of very diverse people who came to learn that nobody should seek positions of honour or status. What mattered was that they were bound together by friendship with Jesus and called to serve one another in love. There is the first mark of the wisdom of Jesus.

But, out of this community of friendship and the tradition of Proverbs sprang another strand of wisdom. The community of Jesus is, in the words of Pope Francis, to build bridges not walls. And the building of bridges involves the radical demand of Jesus to love our enemies and not to retaliate. It is wisdom modelled to us by Jesus as he dies on the cross forgiving those who crucified him. And it's important to say that the wisdom of Jesus here is not talking about *feeling* love for your enemies. It is more about making a choice to seek the well-being of someone who has hurt us whether we like them or not. It is about recognising that they are our brother or sister, made in the image of God, even if that image has become obscure to us. Thomas Merton once said: "Our job is to love others without stopping to enquire whether or not they are worthy – that is not our business... what we are asked to do is to love and this love will render our neighbour worthy". In other words, our concern for their well-being will give that person worth and dignity. So, the second aspect of the wisdom of Jesus is to love our enemies and pray for those that hate us.

Then lastly the wisdom of Jesus calls us to love our enemies because that is what God is like – he makes the sun rise and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. The wisdom of Jesus reveals to us a God who is compassionate,

gracious and generous; a heavenly Father whose mercy takes precedence over administering justice. Jesus proclaims this wisdom in parable after parable. But he also acts it out in the way he forgives sinners; in the welcome he gives to outcasts and the succour he provides for the sick. And by revealing so fully the goodness and generosity of God Jesus is wanting to empower us to live with absolute trust in God. He tells us not to worry; not to be afraid; and shows us his own trust on the cross as he commends himself to his heavenly Father.

There then, in brief, is the wisdom of Jesus in which the disciples were instructed. And the followers of Jesus needed to be formed by this radical wisdom because they were called to be different. In today's gospel they were to be as salt and light in the world showing the mercy and compassion of God to everyone regardless of their state or status; building bridges not walls. The wisdom of Jesus is about an inclusive love, a light on a hill to which others are drawn.

But there is one caveat, one word of warning, that comes out of our epistle today. St. Paul was very wary of the wisdom of his age, a wisdom linked to rhetorical eloquence and the power of words. In our postliterate age eloquence has been superseded by the power of image and self-presentation. So,

while St. Paul was wary of being manipulated by words we are to be alert to the manipulation of images. For example, we sometimes find the gospel message being presented as a glossy image and marketed as a product that seems to owe more to the corporate world than to the crucified Jesus. And there is a genuine tension here for all of us. The gospel tells us to be a light on a hill; and one way that happens in our world of technology is by marketing on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. And yet if, as one scholar has suggested, social media is the human wisdom of our age then we need to be careful what we are proclaiming. For we are called to speak not the wisdom of this age but the wisdom of God which is hidden and only revealed mysteriously in the foolishness of the cross. We have to ensure that we stay rooted and formed in the wisdom of Jesus which has no concern for human celebrity; that calls us to be radical in loving our enemies – not a common occurrence on social media; and that trusts ultimately not in the power of technology or AI but in the generous love of our heavenly Father.