Playing the Fool Jesus College, Oxford, 11 Feb 2019

Genesis 18.20-33, 1 Cor 1

Before I start, a health warning. Be very careful of taking anything I say seriously. Here is what was posted about me in late 2017 in the comments thread beneath a news article on the Premier Christian Website:

> *This man has no convictions about his beliefs. Like many others, to him [*being a Christian minister*] is just a job. Intelligent school children will see him as a person of no conviction and…incredibly unstable... The New Testament would describe him as 'a double-minded man - unstable in all his ways'. Syncretism [*by which she means a mish-mash of different traditions*] is not clever, nor is it practised by people of integrity.*

Sisters and brothers, your preacher for this evening…

To be clear, this correspondent has never met me. She was commenting on an article about me, as Headteacher of a Jewish secondary school, being ordained in the Church of England. Her responses showed above all that she has little experience of either of the roles concerned, and there's no shame in that. One might hope that she'd have moderated her response in line with her level of ignorance, but that's social media for you.

If we are generous to her and ignore the personal attack, she is simply articulating a particular vision of educational leadership and religious ministry. It's not the one that informs my practice of these roles, but in truth, it's probably the more usual one across the centuries and across the globe today. And isn't there common sense to it? We want those who lead us in religious institutions to be clear, strong and stable in their positions and in their values. They present and they represent God to us, and so they need to be rock solid and unwavering in their faith commitment, to help everyone knows where the boundaries are.

Well, perhaps. But boundaries and borders can be very tricky, or so I've heard, and we can't always have the leaders we want. More to the point, what if even God is not as solid, unwavering and sensible as we might want? I've taken as my title this evening 'Playing the Fool' – and our two readings tonight present God as neither strong nor stable, in the normal meaning of those terms: we might even say that God looks like a 'fool' who can be 'played'. But in this series of sermons on creativity, I want to suggest that playfulness, foolishness is a key characteristic of God's creativity, and something we might cultivate in our spiritual lives both as individuals and as a church.

Let's start with the passage from Genesis. Forget, for the moment, the reasons *why* God is planning the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah –that would really be another sermon. Whether it is homosexuality, or abuse of hospitality, or rape or exploitation or whatever, let's just accept that wickedness abounds in these two towns and God sees fit to punish it. What's interesting is that, knowing this and knowing God, Abraham sets about persuading God to reconsider.

Abraham **haggles** with God. He seeks to argue for a change in the divine mind and a stay of execution for these benighted cities, and he does it by waving God's own values in his face. If you destroy the city, the innocent will suffer along with the guilty, and that would mean you, the God of justice, would be acting unjustly. Oy gevalt.

How do you respond to Abraham's negotiations with God? Are you slightly shocked at his impudence? Do you recoil from his chutzpah? And what about the fact that God is apparently **willing** to negotiate, and allows himself to be bartered down from his unilateral decision to destroy, through an agreement to hold fire for 50 righteous people, then 45, 40…to the point where if there are just ten decent human beings, the fire and brimstone are off. You almost expect Abraham to throw in a free table lamp. God is willing to listen, to change his mind, to have Abraham, a mere mortal, hold him to account, and even to quote his own moral standards against him.

What kind of a God even tolerates – let alone indulges – such bare-faced cheek? Has he no thought for the radical otherness of the divine, for the dangers of precedent-setting? Apparently not – at least in this part of the story. Harvey Belovski, the Rabbi of Golders Green, describes the relationship between the Jewish people and God as one of "negotiated obedience". They will do what they are told, but they insist on a proper debate about the terms – and are always ready to answer a question with a question. This passage shows that tradition in the making.

My job as Headteacher of JCoSS certainly bears this out as an ongoing reality in how I have to manage behaviour in the school community. They will do what they are told, and they do behave well, but there's a deal to be done about when that detention is served, and whether it should be two hours or just one, whether there is parity with Josh Cohen who was done for the same thing last term, and whether I might reconsider if the Jewish Chronicle took an interest in the story. And that's just the parents.

Lest you think I am lapsing into tropes and stereotypes, parents and students alike cheerfully embrace the characterisation. The deal between school, parents and students is that this sometimes maddening feistiness is the flip side of something really, really precious: an engagement with – and a passion for – justice, a high value for education and great love and loyalty for the school. It's the sort of thing any school leader would give their eye teeth for. And – crucially – it's not so much hostile as playful: I'll argue with the Headteacher not to be defiant but because, well, it's how in our tradition we have always shown the seriousness with which we take rules and authority.

What then should we make of this story – bearing in mind of course that in the end there aren't enough righteous people so the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah goes ahead anyway. Should we dismiss it as a story to show what undeveloped faith looks like? Is it an unfortunate piece of anthropomorphising – Abraham imagining that God is an equal to be bartered with? After all, a God who could be manipulated like this wouldn't be God at all. The whole narrative is unedifying, we might say, and the view of faith, and of God, that it presents is uncomfortable to say the least.

But then, something similar comes out when we look at our passage from 1st Corinthians.

- For God's *foolishness* is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength…
- Since…the world did not know God through wisdom…God chose what is *foolish* in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.

It rather looks again as though God is failing to stand by the dignity of the divine office. Abandoning the usual rules of engagement, not worrying about precedent or respecting boundaries, the author bursts into his own narrative, becoming incarnate in creation as Jesus and enduring the worst humiliation and torture that creation can afford. And that's the point, says Paul: the horror of cross is *meant* to be theologically uncomfortable, it's *meant* to turn upside down everything we thought about wisdom and power and authority, so that our rescue from our muddle-headedness about them can be executed. How hard a truth it is to hold on to…but that is the God with whom we have to deal.

God is, of course, no fool. We're not talking about sheer folly and silliness; this is rather the deep wisdom of the Shakespearean Fool who wraps up deep and often painful truths in playfulness and ironic humour so that they can find a way in more easily, and get more surely to the heart of the powerful. Maybe irony and humour feel shocking at the foot of the cross, but if we can get our heads around talking about the crucifixion as victory over evil, or the triumph of love, perhaps we can also see behind it and through it the playful, compassionate, creative laughter of the Almighty.

Humour is so often about the playful interruption of patterns: it's a close friend of the scandal and the stumbling block that Paul mentions: the bewigged judge who breaks into a dance routine, or the funeral procession that turns into a car chase. What I love about being the priest who leads a Jewish school are the occasions when it has that same ability to surprise – and then to lead on to creative and glorious conversations about faith, and identity, and religion, and sometimes on to suffering and forgiveness…and the meaning of it all. Boundaries become less important, hearts and minds open, walls are repurposed as bridges, swords as ploughshares.

I know the sensible thing for me – and it would probably pacify my unknown critic from Premier Christian Radio – would be to become Headteacher of a Christian school. Neat and tidy, consistent and comfortable, strong and stable…and in truth there is a wonderful tradition of Headteacher priests who combine the roles with distinction and inspiration. But there is a dance with definitions afforded by my being among Christians as one who knows and loves Judaism, and among Jews as one who knows and loves Christianity…and I hope that points in some way to the boundary-crossing, creative God who calls us all to join the dance.

The kind of God who is foolish enough to be bartered with by mere mortals is also the kind who becomes mortal and dies to set mere mortals free from their foolishness. The story of Abraham isn't a story of undeveloped faith – it's an early insight into the nature of God as Christianity knows him. Or at least, ought to know: God as a boundary crosser, a partner in chutzpah, not standing by ceremony or dignity but engaging with his people to find a way to mercy and forgiveness. If that doesn't sound too much like the proclamation of Christian faith, maybe we've lost touch with something important.

If Judaism has a reputation for argument, it also has a reputation for humour: I was at a Bat Mitzvah yesterday in which the young girl marking her transition to Jewish adulthood – the daughter of a rabbi, noch – complained in her address that the set reading (two chapters of detailed instructions about the construction of the tabernacle) was one of the dullest in the Torah; to which the Rabbi later responded that she was mistaken – the Torah gets far duller than that. It seems to be harder for Christians to laugh – after all, Jesus died for your sins and it's not funny – but I do think we would do well – both as individuals and as a tradition – to recover a sense of the playfulness of God.