

## **A Sermon preached at St Mary's, Warwick by Vaughan S Roberts**

**BBC Radio 4 Sunday Worship 6<sup>th</sup> July 2014**

*Proverbs 8: 1, 22-31; Matthew 11: 16-19, 25-30*

Highly regarded American movie-maker Alex Gibney is probably best known for his documentaries '*We Steal Secrets: The Story of Wikileaks*' and '*Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room*' about the bankruptcy of the US energy giant. His most recent film – to be released in the UK later this year – is a documentary about Fela Kuti, the Nigerian singer, musician and pioneer of Afrobeat who died in 1997.

In Gibney's retelling of Kuti's story, religion plays a significant role. Kuti was brought up in a Christian household before embracing other forms of African spirituality. He had his own personal magician or spiritual adviser whose influence in Kuti's life was not seen by all to be beneficial. As one friend commented: "You stroke a sacred monster, you get your hand bitten off!" Religion has always been a two sided coin and the sacred can involve the bad as well as the good.

Jesus would certainly have had sympathy with the observation about the risks of stroking a sacred monster. In our passage from Matthew's Gospel, Jesus suggests there appears to be no way of getting things right for some people: "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn." He seems to be saying: we organized a party and you were miserable; so then we joined in the lamentation and that wasn't right either.

Of course his observation doesn't just apply to the world of faith; it's a comment on the contrariness of humanity more generally. I'm sure we've all experienced or witnessed moments – in everyday life, at work, in politics, or wherever – when people appear to set their faces sternly against something, and no accommodation or compromise is accepted.

As well as being present in the Gospels, these strands of human experience are also reflected in the current interest in historical novels and extend into our continued fascination with imaginary worlds, such as those created by J R R Tolkien and George R R Martin. The novels and subsequent dramas about *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Game of Thrones*, re-cast the social dynamics we recognize from history and our own experience into enchanted worlds of fantasy and make-believe which are populated by characters that are much more vivid and surprising than our real lives.

George Martin is renowned for suddenly killing off characters in his novels and it's moments like that when the world of fantasy departs from the world in which we live. We can't just kill off any characters we encounter for dramatic effect or because we find them frustrating. Instead we're anchored in the real world of life and living where we need to make sense of the good and the bad that we find in ourselves and in others.

So how do we find a way through all of this? In our Gospel passage, Jesus suggests one answer: "Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds ... wisdom is vindicated by her deeds." There is a strong wisdom tradition in Judaism, which continues to be deeply formative in Christianity. We saw that tradition in our first reading where Wisdom is described as being a

vital part of the divine process of creation. We heard Wisdom speak: ‘Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water.’ And we can see from our second reading that this wisdom tradition shaped Jesus’ teaching and ministry.

Another character from the Gospels who’s important here is Thomas the Twin or ‘Doubting Thomas’ as he’s often known. And last Thursday many churches marked the annual commemoration of his feast day. Thomas provides a striking example of wisdom being vindicated by her deeds. Thomas was the disciple who wasn’t present when Jesus first appeared to his immediate followers. Thomas wouldn’t take the others’ word for it that they’d seen the Risen Christ. He wanted something much more tangible and to see for himself.

When the encounter between Jesus and Thomas eventually took place, Christ encouraged his disciple to touch him and grasp the reality of his risen presence whilst at the same time commending those who would not see and yet believe. Thomas wouldn’t accept the testimony or wisdom of others; he needed to encounter the incarnate Christ for himself for the testimony of the other disciples to be vindicated. Of course the question could be asked whether Thomas showed wisdom in disbelieving his fellow disciples – and there’s also a question in that thought for each of us.

As far as vindication is concerned, Christianity’s not an ‘either/or faith’ – it’s a ‘both/and’ faith which we see in a phrase like ‘faith seeking understanding.’ Faith seeking understanding is particularly associated with St Anselm – philosopher, theologian and Archbishop of Canterbury. Like St Thomas he walked the way of Christ which believes wisdom and faith can be part of the same journey.

Scripture speaks of wisdom being a gift from God and Jesus teaches it is right to use that gift in the service of faith. Not only does it help us in the process of discerning truth and understanding and entering the experience of others, it also assists in sifting our everyday experiences of home, workplace and community.

Following the path of wisdom that Jesus commends – bringing our minds as well as our hearts to such encounters – enables us to recognize those deeds which are from the Spirit of God.

For more on Alex Gibney’s film *Finding Fela* (2014) and other movies shown at 2014 Sundance London Film Festival see my online review article for the *Journal of Religion & Film* which can be found here: <http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol18/iss1/33/> and here [http://works.bepress.com/vaughan\\_roberts/37/](http://works.bepress.com/vaughan_roberts/37/)