



**A sermon for Choral Evensong at Wells Cathedral,
preached on Sunday 2 August by the Reverend
Rosey Lunn, Priest Vicar.**

The Ninth Sunday after Trinity

Readings: 1 Kings 10, 1-13; Acts 13, 1-13

It must have been a dazzling affair, that visit of the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon. Who was she? And where did she come from?

In Biblical times, the ancient land of Sheba (or Saba) was located in the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula, primarily in modern-day Yemen, with territories stretching across the Red Sea into Ethiopia and Eritrea. So she arrived – as Handel so gloriously depicted it in musical terms – with all her retinue, and her camels bearing spices, gold and precious stones, almug wood to be used in the construction not only of houses but musical instruments...

But underneath all the bling and the riches, there was a serious purpose: she came with hard questions for the king, and she told him *'all that was on her mind.'* It was an open and frank conversation – nothing was hidden from the king that he could not explain to her.

How fascinating it would have been to overhear their conversation! Did they talk about affairs of state; about the price of camels? Did she ask him what was the secret of his success? At the end of the visit, it seems that what had impressed her most was his wisdom. *'Your wisdom and prosperity far surpass the report I had heard...'* In her mind, King Solomon's wisdom seemed to be bound up with his prosperity, for clearly, he had made the right choices, and been blessed by the God of Israel: *'Blessed be the Lord your God, who has delighted in you and set you on the throne of Israel.'* The Queen of Sheba was indeed impressed by all that she saw, and I think she went away with a great deal to think about.

And now picture another meeting, some ten centuries later, this one taking place at Paphos in Cyprus. Paphos is a popular tourist destination today, offering beaches, bars, atmosphere, Cypriot charm.

Saul – who I shall refer to as Paul – had arrived in Cyprus, with his helper

Barnabas, and first delivered the Christian message in the Jewish synagogues; but when they arrive in Paphos, they are summoned to meet with the pro-consul, Sergius Paulus – described by Luke, the writer of Acts as an '*intelligent man*'; who seems to have heard something of Paul and Barnabas and their Christian faith, and is, we are told '*keen to hear the word of God.*' like the Queen of Sheba, he had serious questions to ask of Saul and Barnabas. But someone else was present who rather got in the way of the conversation: this was 'Bar-Jesus' otherwise known as Elymas, who we are told was a *magician*.

Magicians in the ancient world practiced astrology, sorcery, and spirit invocation. Archaeological discoveries from the Greco-Roman era show how widespread magical papyri, spells, and incantations were. It all sounds a bit like Glastonbury! We are not told exactly in what capacity Elymas was in attendance upon the pro-consul Sergius Paulus – maybe the proconsul had turned to him for spiritual advice, and Elymas was seeking to influence him. He certainly didn't like being confronted by the authority of Paul and Barnabas, which clearly undermined any influence he might have had.

Elymas embodied the syncretistic mixture of occultism and deception; he was both a magician and a false prophet. His name "Bar-Jesus" means "son of Jesus," but Paul exposed him as a true "son of the devil," who had made crooked the straight path of the Lord.

What follows this confrontation is a dramatic act by Paul: Paul declares to Elymas '*the hand of the Lord is against you, and you will be blinded for a while, unable to see. And immediately 'mist and darkness came over Elymas, and he went about groping for someone to lead him by the hand.*'

Paul seems to have understood what Elymas needed, in his confusion – he needed some darkness. And Paul understood because he too had been in a similar state of confusion – not because of sorcery, witchcraft or such nonsense, but because of his hardened heart, which had so distorted the truth of the message of Jesus that he had lost his way, in spiritual terms; on the road to Damascus, he had been stopped in his tracks by a dazzling light, and the voice of Jesus saying '*I am Jesus whom you are persecuting*', and he, too, had then been plunged into darkness, while he reflected on his need for forgiveness and a new beginning. It's as if he says to Elymas, 'you need to get rid of all that rubbish in your head... just as I had to.'

Paul, of course, had his sight restored, and did indeed find forgiveness and grace, and a new beginning as a powerful communicator of the Christian faith – as we see in this story.

We are not told what happened to Elymas in the end – whether, after his time of darkness, he saw the light and found peace of mind, and was able to make a

new start...

But we do know that this striking episode made such an impression on the proconsul Sergius Paulus that he embraced the Christian faith – his questions were answered by the power that shone out from the message Paul proclaimed.

So – two people who wanted answers, and who each seem to have discovered for themselves where truth lay, despite the dazzling distractions all around them. And what of us, as we wonder where true wisdom is to be found? How can we know the best way to live, the teaching which will make sense of our lives, the values by which we can get things right, in a world where so much seems to be artificial?

We want to follow Jesus – but the world is a confusing place; with its 'influencers', its appeal to celebrity and status, its preoccupation with material success. We certainly have our own 'magicians' in the 21st century – they promise us flawless complexions, perfectly toned bodies, fabulous holidays, amazing relationships, dream homes – anything you could wish for. But is it all for show? As shallow as Elymas's empty promises?

As the old hymn 'O Jesus I have promised' puts it:
*O let me feel thee near me – the world is ever near;
I see the sights that dazzle, the tempting sounds I hear...*

Where are we to find wisdom? Truth? Authenticity?

In his beautiful poem 'The Night' – the metaphysical poet Henry Vaughan recalls how the Jewish leader Nicodemus had come to Jesus by night, seeking wise advice about just such things – and asking how could anyone be 'born again'; 'how can these things be?' And yet, though we are not explicitly told, Nicodemus must have found light in that darkness, for he appears again as a supporter of Jesus later in the gospel of John; so the poet Vaughan writes of him:

*Wise Nicodemus saw such light
As made him know his God by night.
Most blest believer he!
Who in that land of darkness and blind eyes
Thy long-expected healing wings could see.....*

And Vaughan ends his poem Night with these lines:
*There is in God — some say —
A deep but dazzling darkness, as men here
Say it is late and dusky, because they
See not all clear.*

*Oh for that night, where I in Him
Might live invisible and dim!*

I suspect that when the world confuses and dazzles us with its endless 'bling', its false shining lights, we need a time to repose quietly in the deep darkness of God, to discover there our true selves, and the light which shines into all our darkness, and illuminates our deepest questions.

So, we pray:

*Enlighten with faith's light my heart,
in flame it with love's fire;
then shall I sing and bear a part
with that celestial choir.
I shall, I fear, be dark and cold,
with all my fire and light;
yet when thou dost accept their gold,
Lord, treasure up my mite.*

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