

St Laurence Day / 10 Aug 2014 ✠ St Laurence's, South Hinksey
Wisdom 4: 10-15 / Ps 24:1-6 / 2 Corinthians 9: 6-10 / John 12: 24-26

It does not enter their heads that grace and mercy await the chosen of the Lord, and protection, his holy ones.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit —
Amen.

Scuttlebutt would have it that *everyone knows* the sort of people who go to church regularly — people such as I, alas, and possibly such as you — that such church people are killjoys, incapable of having a really good time and therefore determined to ruin everybody else's fun. And because everybody knows this, nobody feels obliged to show that it's true, any more than one needs to show that water is wet or that ice is cold. Likewise, anybody who speaks up in defence of going to church instantly makes herself the target of suspicion. This is part of the point of what "everyone knows": namely, to divide the *insiders* who sensibly agree with what everybody supposedly knows from the *outsiders* whom one can safely regard as loonies, fruitbats, fundamentalists, or the intolerably holy high-flyers.

That's how "everyone knows" works; and the trick comes when we run into circumstances that oblige us to puzzle out for ourselves the difference between things that *everyone knows* because they actually make sense of the world, from the things that everyone *thinks* they know because it makes life easier to go along with popular prejudice. Whatever we may think of a figure such as Richard Dawkins, he

exemplifies the way that a brilliant scientist, someone who *earned* his acclaim by attending to tiny details and organising them into a grand interwoven pattern, can at the same time fall into the habit of parroting tedious clichés which bear only the most tenuous relation to what you could plainly observe with naked eyes and open ears.

All of us, almost all of us give way to “everyone knows” thinking some of the time. We see the best in people we like, who are like us, and we excuse their faults — while we see the personal flaws in the ignorant shiftless louts who are *unlike* us. We hide from ourselves the full magnitude of our own mortality, and behave as though we’ll live indefinitely. We treat large-scale problems such as global warfare and terrorism, or climate change, as inevitable, even though we ought at least contribute toward minimising them by changing our own behaviour. But that’s hard because, after all, *everyone knows* that the changes we make are insignificantly small, *everyone knows* that we are fundamentally good people, beset by self-serving rogues and scoundrels. Everyone knows that it’s unlikely that we’ll die at any moment, so we might as well not think unpleasant thoughts about a temporal world in which we all will cease to be.

At the same time, though, we can see that some of what “everyone knows” is just plain wrong. Here at St Laurence’s, we know that church-going people are not the priggish killjoys that some “everyone” *knows* Christians to be. We are friends, we are family; we delight in beauty, in a splendid well-prepared meal with our dear ones, in lovely music, fine workmanship, in a strike curling just outside the goaltender’s extended fingers. We know that the gospel is no dour handbook of finger-wagging prohibitions, but *good news*, the very best news, good tidings of great joy that shall be to us and to all men. Everyone may *think* that Christians scold and glower, but here in St

Laurence's, at friendly and active congregations all over England, all over the world, followers of Jesus share in a communion meal of bread and wine, a great thanksgiving for gifts beyond our deserving shared with a universal family of our sisters and brothers.

When what "everyone knows" is wrong, some people manage to see *past* the foolish wisdom of the world to a truer actuality. We gathered here, for instance, could testify that church-goers are every bit as joyful and pleasant as anyone else (in fact, at our best I would venture to submit that we are *more* celebratory, *more* joyous than most people — we hold a supernatural party every week, with the bread of angels and wine from heaven!). Whereas *everyone knows* that wee wheaten wafers are just bread, and a sip of diluted wine is just drink, through sharing in these sacramental blessings *we* understand that more is going on than what everyone knows.

Our perception of the world *sees through* what everyone knows — and that capacity to look past the (apparently) obvious opens up some of our inheritance from St Laurence, some of the splendour of the true wisdom of which this morning's Old Testament lesson speaks. Where everyone in Rome knew that the Emperor stood for law and order, for good hard-working men and women who broke their backs for the fish and cheese and crusts they got, and "everyone knew" that the Emperor stood as the earthly representative for invisible spiritual powers, St Laurence *saw through* what everyone around him knew. Where everyone knew that the desperate poor were scroungers and layabouts, St Laurence saw strugglers and laid-aside labourers. Where the Emperor's wisdom held that the many had to make sacrifices to maintain social stability, St Laurence knew that the gospel obliges us to *share out* everything that is good without fearing that we'll be *left out*. St Laurence reminds us that we can't make a single hair of our heads white

or black, that we cannot save or justify ourselves, that our well-being depends on the well-being of all our neighbours without regard to *earning* or *deserving*. We struggle to keep our focus on seeing with St Laurence's vision; much easier just to go along with common knowledge. But until we can die to what everyone knows, the seed of the gospel will be throttled by thorns, withered by heat, gobbled up by temptation, vainglory, desire. St Laurence's example reminds us that the gifts we receive from God do not serve our interests as simple vouchers toward salvation, but these gifts come to us as nourishment to strengthen our capacity to do what God calls us to, and as medicine to remedy the blindness of acceding to what everyone knows.

The wisdom by which we see through what everyone knows sets us at odds with "everyone". Not always in a romantic, rebellious, dramatic way — the media are full of Christians who wish they were suffering for Christ, when really they're mostly just being disagreeable. But as long as we see with St Laurence's eyes, we will make it our principal concern to please God, to steer clear of evil and to avoid treachery. When we make way for others, when we suffer wrong without complaining, when we fast without whinging and pray without press releases, we grow closer to God's wisdom, which *everyone* can behold, but not all understand; they can hear, but not listen. "It does not enter their heads that grace and mercy await the chosen of the Lord, and protection, his holy ones."

Our gospel lesson today teaches that "unless a wheat grain falls on the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest." We read that because St Laurence's death as a martyr, as a witness, did not end, but only *began* his powerful testimony. But this lesson applies not only to great martyrs like Laurence — *all of us* lead lives that bear fruit. All of us will, one day, fall to the ground; but we

have been nourished with Christ's own Body and Blood, we see with St Laurence's wisdom, and we know that in the death that will one day come to each of Christ's followers we are more than conquerors. What "everyone knows" can't guide us to holiness and sanctity, but what St Laurence knows, what St Paul knows, what our Lord Jesus Christ knows will never fail us.

The power of what "everyone knows" resides in how easy we make it for other people to go along with common knowledge. St Laurence made it harder for the Romans to believe that the church plays the same power games as all the politicians; he made it harder to think of the poor and disabled as devious scroungers when he brought them forward as the very treasures of the Church. And when his difficult message, his unnerving wisdom stood up against the power of the Empire, Laurence was tortured and executed — but not silenced, and NEVER defeated. Our very gathering here this morning defies common knowledge; our gospel proclaims a divine foolish fondness for left-behind sinners. Following in the steps of St Laurence himself, may we continue to see beyond what everyone thinks they know, and trusting that he who provides seed for the sower and bread for food will provide us with all the seed we want and make the harvest of our good deeds a large one.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

AMEN