

1 Corinthians 1.18-25
Foolishness and Truth

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Christ the Wisdom and Power of God

¹⁸For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.¹⁹For it is written:

"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise;
the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate."^[a]

²⁰Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.²²Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom,²³but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.

Introduction

The cross of Christ is a Lent theme. At the end of Lent lies a Cross. Before we celebrate resurrection there will be a cross; There must be a cross because it is there that Jesus poured out his life in our place; it is there Jesus offered the sacrifice of himself for us, so that our sin might be atoned for and we might be free. It is a great freedom that he won: freedom from condemnation because of sin, freedom from despair, freedom to live out our lives in relationship with God. All of history, the entire universe shifted when Christ offered himself on the cross and nothing looked the same again

The Cross of Christ: We all need to keep the Cross of Christ before ourselves. The Church needs to keep the Cross of Christ ever before us. At the heart of our message and witness in the world lies the Cross of Christ. Without it our message lacks its true power to. With it, we offer life.

I want to look at this passage from 1 Corinthians in which Paul encourages this group of Christians from Corinth to keep the cross of Christ before them in a challenging context.

1. The Power of the Cross

18 For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.

The Christians in the Church in Corinth are trying to sell the Gospel, in an ethnically mixed context, amongst Jews and Greeks. It is an intellectually textured environment. Although the Corinthian Christians were, according to the text, a fairly working class kind of group, they were operating amongst scholars and philosophers. A heady environment which placed much emphasis upon stunning arguments and oratorical skills. In that context the idea of pushing a crucified Saviour who saves by giving up his life must have been a hard sell. It becomes much easier to try to sell a gospel-lite, one shorn of that awkward message of the cross with its call to repentance and promise of mercy. Perhaps they were tempted to try to match the oratorical skills of the orator and the arguments of the philosopher. But the danger Paul sees is that in doing they were losing sight of the Cross of Jesus and casting attention upon the preacher instead of the Lord.

But look at how Paul divides the world into those who are *perishing* and those who are *being saved*. He says is that for those whose hearts and minds are closed to the gospel, the message of the cross is just foolishness: it is incomprehensible. Receiving a hostile response to the preaching does not mean that there is something wrong with the gospel. The message of the gospel stands before all with its promise of forgiveness and its offer of mercy.

One time I was asked to speak in a college hall in Southampton to a small meeting. A group of Christians invited their non-Christian friends, and I was to give a gospel presentation. The idea was that the non-Christians would respond by falling on their knees and be converted to faith in Christ. This did not happen as planned. In fact a rather lively discussion ensued between the Christians and non-Christians who put up a good fight. And the Christians became so exasperated that they resorted to threatening them will Hell and pointed out to them that it would be very “hot down there”. And I thought (O My Goodness).

As Christians we must not be discouraged when people do not immediately fall on their knees in repentance the moment we open our mouths. When you consider the idea that a man named Jesus died in disgrace on a Roman cross for sin and rose again three days later and invites us into relationship with him - that is a tall order. Sometimes people respond, sometimes they do not. Either way, we preach the gospel. Not every one will receive it all immediately, but no matter. That does not mean there is something wrong with them. People respond how people respond. I think the Corinthian church struggled with being a small little group in much bigger world, not unlike us today. But at the heart of the gospel is not an argument to be won. At the heart of the gospel is a relationship with God and until that becomes real to someone, the message of the gospel will be foolishness. *For those who are perishing;*

Notice that Paul also says: for those *who are being saved it is the power of God*. I like that because there is a sense of process: salvation is a process. What seemed so incomprehensible before now begins to make sense: a Crucified Saviour who has made the sacrifice for you, so you can be free. When you begin to see the power of the cross to save, you come under the shadow of that cross, and it is awesome. It makes no difference who you are – the highest intellectual, the most successful person or the humblest and quietest it makes no difference, there is no distinction: we all must come the Cross of Christ; we all may come and for all it is the power to save. But you can't be argued into that, we all have to come ourselves.

You might be aware of that journey within yourself. We do not come fully formed as Christians. We are people who are being saved; whether like me you have been an Anglican all your life or have come in and out of the faith or whatever your journey take this phrase “those who are being saved” for yourself. We do not have the whole picture yet and we are not better than anyone else. But you have begun to draw closer to God and become more aware of him drawing you closer to him. You might sense a desire to grow spiritually a hunger for more. Just be aware that is what is going on for you spiritually, that God is drawing you to Himself.

But Paul goes on:

The Folly of Philosophy

20 Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, 21 God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.

Human wisdom, God's wisdom. The point Paul is making is that however exalted the intellectual construct, no human being has figured out God. You see the categories of people they dealt with: the wise man, the scholar, the philosopher – pretty exalted company to try to sell the gospel to. Salvation did not come about because someone thought things through. I love the play on words: **in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him.** This is human wisdom they are teaching: the gospel is God's wisdom.

It is foolishness whenever human beings think they have figured out God. Every time a human philosophy or movement comes along it has its day and then passes into history. You might have heard of the British scientist Richard Dawkins; a fierce atheist and author of the Book "The God Delusion." Very intelligent man who believes science holds the answers. I read a wonderful put-down in a British paper which said "He's so dated; doesn't he realize we are post-modern now." Dawkins is making the arguments of yesterday, society moves on. Where is the scholar? Where is the wisdom of this age? It rises for a time and passes into history. In the end none of it captures God, none of it ties him down because human wisdom and divine wisdom are opposites. It is arrogance whenever human beings think that we have found the answers. In the 2000 years since Christ was born, intellectual and philosophical movements have risen and fallen, world views have come and gone and none of it has enclosed God. God has ordained that human wisdom will not reach to him because if we did we would be bold enough to say: see, there is no God. That is the folly of philosophy and every generation falls into it.

Rather: ***God has revealed himself.*** It is not in the brilliance of the argument or the thoroughness of the research that salvation comes but in the foolishness of a Messiah who saves by dying on a Cross. Salvation comes to each one of us not in the moment of our greatest triumph but when we all, rich and poor, super—intelligent and mere mortal, beautiful and ordinary bow ourselves down before the Cross of Christ and beg for mercy.

We are saved by what Christ has done and salvation comes into our lives very simply vs. 21: ***when we believe.*** When you come before the Cross of Christ and believe in your heart that Christ died for you that is salvation. No esoteric argument, no magic show, just a simple preaching of the gospel. Which is what our society needs just as much today. Oh people will ignore the gospel; many will ridicule. The vast majority in our society simply do not know any thing about the gospel. So we just have to tell them. Simply. This leads me to my last point:

The Wisdom of Weakness vs 24

But to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

We started with the only true division there is: between those who are perishing and those who are being saved. Here the only true unity. Notice how inclusive the gospel is, it embraces both Jews and Greeks. It embraces all nationalities, all income brackets, and all intellectual levels. There is no distinction, for all who come and bow down before the cross of Christ it is the same power and wisdom of God.

Those who are called. Paul is not teaching that only some people are called. The Bible teaches us that God is always at work in the world drawing people to himself. This means that when you become a Christian you are in fact responding to God's call upon your life. Not everyone responds to that call, not everyone listens. But when someone hears God calling them and in some way, grasps that God is reaching out to them, calling them to relationship with himself, they being to see for themselves the truth of the Gospel. It's what we call conversion. It is a process.

And it happens not in the brilliance of the argument or the excellence of the presentation: conversion to faith in Christ happens in human hearts one at a time.

Paul is saying to them then: just be true to the Gospel; preach Christ Crucified and don't worry.

And to us here today Paul is saying: just be true to the Gospel; preach Christ Crucified and don't worry.

For we do not need to fine tune Christianity to make it more appealing to our society today. What we need to do in big ways and in small is to preach the good news and invite people into relationship with Christ. We need to trust that God in His wisdom knows what people need; that God knows that it is the Cross people need. Foolish as it may seem, what every human being deeply needs is to come and throw their sin and guilt down before the cross of Christ in repentance; what every human being desperately needs to hear is that their sins are forgiven that they are right with God and that He loves them so.

When that happens in someone's life; the world changes. And we, brothers and sisters can help make it happen.

At the Cross of Christ.