

1 Corinthians 1.18 – 2.5

Believing Foolishly

Christ Church

Sunday 19 September 2021

Seeing the Son [2]

The message of the cross

Welcome to the second instalment in our series *Seeing the Son*. In 1 Corinthians 1-4 Paul reminds the Corinthians – and us – what really matters, encouraging us to refocus ourselves on Jesus.

Last week we looked at how to wait eagerly for Jesus to be revealed, by standing on the solid ground of God's call, being changed by God's grace, and learning to be united around Jesus as sisters and brothers in God's family.

This week we'll see that the world today is not so different from the world of first-century Corinth, with similar distractions and focus on appearances. And we'll see how Paul addresses that by bringing us back to the foundation of the Christian faith: **Jesus Christ and him crucified** (2.2). We'll see that the message of the cross is (1) foolish, (2) weak, and (3) simple.

The cross is foolish (1.18-24)

First: the message of the cross is foolish.

I think the most foolish thing I've done this year – though Jess may disagree, I don't know – was probably when I used my desk chair to reach something down off the top shelf in my old study – the chair span round and I fell, crashing into my digital piano, badly twisting my arm and shoulder, and almost smashing my head into the door handle.

I got in a lot of trouble for that with the wife... and was told to stop being lazy, and to get the kitchen steps when I need to reach something down from my top shelf...

It was a foolish thing to do. But what does it mean to be *wise*?

Some of the Christians in Corinth were obsessed with wisdom. For them wisdom meant being clever, intelligent, witty. They thought they could tell someone was wise by how they spoke. If a speech happened to be full of clever arguments and long words, delivered with passion that swayed and inspired – then *that* speaker was 'wise', no matter *what* they said.

Some schools taught ‘rhetoric’ – skills to help you persuade, to bring praise and even fame. Rhetoric was about presentation – it didn’t really matter what you said, as long as you said it with style. Others of the Christians in Corinth cared less about words and more about signs and wonders. They wanted the experience, to see miracles, to have a good show. They wanted the pazazz, the music, the lights, the dry ice.

Paul put it like this: **Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom** (1.22). What do both have in common? They were more interested in entertainment than the truth, they preferred style to substance, and chose glamour over the gospel. If that’s what you’re looking for, it’s no wonder Paul said **the message of the cross is foolishness** (1.18), and talked about **the foolishness of what he preached** (1.21).

In Roman times if you wanted to talk about a new way of life, you wouldn’t start with crucifixion – one of the cruellest, most brutal, utterly humiliating ways to be killed. It was so awful that the writer Cicero said the very *word* ‘cross’ shouldn’t even be spoken by Roman citizens. It’s easy for us to forget that because for us the cross is an item of jewellery to be worn around our neck, a piece of beautiful wood to be held.

We have good reasons for doing so – which we'll come to in a bit – but it makes it harder for us to see what Paul was saying here.

We preach Christ crucified, he said, **a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles** (1.23).

When they heard Paul was going to talk about new life, they would settle in and rub their hands together in eager expectation of something spectacular. And then Paul said, 'see Jesus who was tortured and killed by the Romans': **we preach Christ crucified**. It wasn't what they were looking for – **but it's what they needed to hear**. Look back with me where our reading began:

the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

1 Corinthians 1.18 (NIV)

If your house is on fire, you don't need help painting the skirting boards or alphabetising your bookshelf – **you need to get out!** You need someone to pull you out of the flames!

That's why Paul says **God** has **made foolish the wisdom of the world** (1.20). God shows it up for what it is: at best a distraction from the truth that we are **perishing**, stopping us from seeing that we are in danger – and at worst a lie pretending to *be* the truth.

As the song goes: **salvation is yours if you do what is true to you, and you do it with love,**ⁱ be true to yourself, do what you think is right, follow your heart. That's what the world says, and it sounds good – but what if **the heart is deceitful**? What if **the heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure** (Jeremiah 17.9)? What if what you think is right is not only wrong but dangerous? God says: you are perishing, you need saving, you need healing. Here is my Son – he won't save you *from* death, he'll save you *through* death – his death. We deserve to die, but Jesus died in our place so we might live; that is **the message of the cross**, and it's the message we need to hear, because we all need to be **saved**.

A man lost his hat, and decided the easiest way to get another was to steal one.

As he was walking along the road he saw a church, and went inside to see if it had a cloakroom. The preacher was in the middle of a sermon on the Ten Commandments – the man paused to listen for a while, and then changed his mind about stealing a hat.

On his way out he ran into the preacher. 'I came here with sin in my heart,' he said, 'But you saved me from crime.'

‘That’s good to hear,’ said the preacher, ‘What sin were you about to commit?’

‘I came here to steal a hat, but your sermon made me change my mind.’

The preacher smiled, ‘May I ask which part of the sermon helped you see the error of your ways?’

The man said, ‘When you reached, “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” I remembered where I’d left my hat.’

The cross is weak (1.25-31)

First, we’ve seen that the message of the cross is foolish – to the world. Second, the message of the cross is weak. Verse 25:

For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

1 Corinthians 1.25 (NIV)

What do you make of Paul talking about God’s **foolishness** and **weakness**? One way of reading it goes something like this: God is *so* wise that even his ‘foolishness’ is wiser than the wisest human wisdom; God is *so* powerful that even his ‘weakness’ is stronger than the strongest human strength.

Of course God is supremely wise and powerful. One of the most-used names for God in the Bible is *El Shaddai*, or ‘God Almighty’.

But I wonder if Paul was doing something else here. After all, despite the taunts, Jesus didn’t take himself down from the cross but submitted himself to it; he died on it, broken and weak.

So instead of saying God’s little finger is more powerful than the world’s strongest man – what if Paul was saying that *strength isn’t what matters to God?*

Instead of saying God’s most foolish moment is wiser than the world’s wisest woman – what if Paul was saying that *wisdom isn’t what matters to God?*

Look with me at verse 26: **not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth.** Instead, God chose (1.27) **the foolish** and **the weak**, (1.28) **the lowly** and **the despised.**

It’s not the most flattering description of a church I’ve ever read. In fact it’s pretty rude, if you think about it! I’m not sure many churches would begin their parish profile like this when advertising for a new vicar! Come and be our vicar – we are foolish, weak, lowly, and despised!

Paul was deliberately bursting their balloon of arrogance. But he was also teaching them about what matters: **not what we can do, but what he has done**. Stop looking at yourself, Paul says, and *see the Son*. Listen to the words Paul uses in these verses:

Think of what you were when you *were called* (1.26)...

God chose the foolish (1.27)...

God chose the weak (1.27)...

God chose the lowly... and the despised (1.28)...

It is because of *him* (1.30)...

[*He*] has become *for us* wisdom from God (1.30)...

We don't have a lot to do in those verses. That's why **no one may boast before him** (1.29). God's people are called, chosen, and receive things Jesus has done for us. What matters is not whether we are weak, strong, wise, foolish, influential or unpopular – what matters is what Jesus has done for us.

Friends, that isn't how the world chooses people. That isn't how we choose our leaders, our MPs, our Chief Executives. MPs are far more likely than the average person to have gone to private school, Oxford or Cambridge. That's what matters to the world. But the good news is, God is different.

God says, I don't care if you're foolish or weak or lowly or even despised – and to prove it, my Son became all those things. It's no coincidence Paul uses those words; he's talking about Jesus! See Jesus, Paul says, he shows us the way. He came and died in shame to show what matters is not winning but weakness, is not strength but sacrifice, is not greed but giving.

The cross undermines the world's values, the things the world prioritises and uses to choose or reject. The cross of Christ even undermines crucifixion *itself* – taking an instrument of torture and death and transforming it into a symbol of life and beauty.

The Church is not for those who went to the right school, or who were born into the right family. The Church is not for the strong but for the weak who know they need a Saviour. God does it all, and then invites us to come and follow Jesus.

The cross is like a railway station – King's Cross, perhaps (!). It doesn't matter who you are; everyone has to go through King's Cross to find God. Or more accurately, Jesus goes through King's Cross to find *us*, to call us home.

Our part is to respond to that call by saying, 'Sorry, yes please, and thank you.'

The cross is simple (2.1-5)

We've seen how the message of the cross is foolish and weak – but it is also simple. I think sometimes Christians feel like we need to have a degree in apologetics or theology to talk about our faith with someone else. But that is simply not true.

Paul was without doubt an effective speaker, but he wasn't a very good one.

When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom... I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words...

1 Corinthians 2.1, 3-4 (NIV)

In fact, once when he was preaching this happened:

Seated in a window was a young man named Eutychus, who was sinking into a deep sleep as Paul talked on and on. When he was sound asleep, he fell to the ground from the third storey and was picked up dead.

Acts 20.9 (NIV)

All was well... Paul raised him from the dead (Acts 20.10). I can't promise to do the same if you die during one of my sermons.

That *doesn't* mean we can be boring... not at all! Paul's point is that *our* part is simply to talk to people about what God has done in Jesus – the rest is up to him. Paul says,

I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

1 Corinthians 2.1-2 (NIV)

Friends, **the message of the cross** is simple: Jesus died in our place, so we might live. **The message of the cross** is simple: only in Jesus can we find life that is stronger than death, because only he has been there and come back again.

The message of the cross is simple, but sharing it isn't easy. It isn't a matter of finding the right form of words, but trusting that **the message of the cross is the power of God** (1.18).

Paul says:

My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power.

1 Corinthians 2.4-5 (NIV)

As we'll see next week, **the demonstration of the Spirit's power** isn't about miracles of healing, but revelation: the way that God by his Spirit opens hearts and minds to see Jesus.

Our part is simply to share **the message of the cross**, to show people how the cross has changed us, and to invite them to see Jesus for themselves. The rest is up to God.

Friends, **the message of the cross** is foolish, weak, and simple.

Through the cross of Christ, God shows the world a new way of life, a new way to live – a way that is open to any who respond to Jesus' call. Although the world may call me a fool, I don't ever want to stop responding, or inviting others to respond to that call.

For I don't know about you, but I would rather be a fool for God and live, than worldly wise and perish.

ⁱ See <https://www.allmusicals.com/lyrics/somethingrotten/weseethelight.htm>. Retrieved on 18/09/2021.