

3rd Sunday in Lent – March 15, 2009

Exodus 20: 1-17; Psalm 19; **1 Corinthians 1: 18-25**; John 2: 13-22

For the message about 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, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

LOOKING LIKE A FOOL

On Friday during the lunch break of the St. Andrew's Hall Board meeting we dedicated four ceramic wall plaques that had been commissioned to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Hall and to honour the long service of Hans Kouwenberg who retires from the Board this spring. The art work interprets four of the Hebrew Prophets: Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Dr. Patricia Ducher-Walls, professor of Hebrew Bible at Vancouver School of Theology spoke about prophesy as part of that ceremony. She reminded the gathering that prophesy is not fortune telling as so many people in society today think and it is not just a verbal assault by some rather strange men. Prophesy is the presentation of a world view – God's world view – in contrast to the prevailing world view. And the authors of the prophetic texts used many actions to support and extend the words that they preached. They were committed to demonstrating the clash of world views that is inevitable when God's way is ignored.

Pat's talk was excellent and it got me to thinking about the text from Paul's letter to the Corinthians. Paul is a prophet in addition to being an apostle – in our reading today we hear him proclaiming a world view that is contrary to what both Jews and Gentiles perceive as sensible. He announces a world view that begins at the cross.

This seems a bit off track in a letter largely devoted to discussing the conflict in Corinth – a division between Jews and Gentiles. Each party heard the gospel from the perspective of their own cultural and religious background. We all still do. The problem for the Corinthians was – and for us still is – to move beyond cultural inhibitions that blind us to the new truth the gospel proclaims. Here Paul makes no explicit references to the problems the Corinthians are experiencing, yet his diagnosis of the root causes of the disagreements becomes clear: they are caught up in rivalries because they glory in the superficially impressive human wisdom of the age.

It seems to me that this is a pretty good diagnosis of the root cause of many problems today as well – we are pretty pleased with human achievement – human wisdom. Sometimes, like the Corinthians, boasting about our own possession of wisdom or rhetorical eloquence and infatuated with leaders who manifest these skills. Obama-mania leaps to mind...

God, however, has revealed in Christ another kind of wisdom that radically subverts the wisdom of the world – disclosing an alternate world view – one that begins at the cross: God has chosen to save the world through the cross, through the shameful and powerless death of the crucified Messiah. If that shocking event is the revelation of the deepest truth about the character of God, then our whole way of seeing the world is turned upside down. Everything has to be reevaluated in light of the cross.

Being saved by the power of God in Christ is as mysterious to us as it was to the conflicted Corinthians. The Jews had the covenant and the Torah which assured them of God's favour. Greeks had their philosophies. For them as for many of us, salvation was a totally unreal and unnecessary experience – foolishness, as Paul so bluntly put it.

This passage contains the heart of Paul's message, not only to the Corinthians, but to every other congregation to which he preached or wrote. All other arguments aside, he proclaimed faith in Jesus Christ crucified and risen as God's sole means of redeeming all of creation. Paul has taken the central event at the heart of the Christian story – the death of Jesus – and used it as the lens through which all human experience must be projected and thereby seen afresh. The cross becomes the starting point for thinking in a whole new way. For any who grasp the paradoxical logic of this text, the world can never look the same again.

Paradoxical logic can be challenging to grasp from the comfort of the pew. In fact, one danger of being in church so much is that what we believe loses its foolish edge – it all starts to seem reasonable. We can speak of Christian faith so casually and effortlessly that we begin to think, "Fine thing, this Christianity – makes good sense." And then we find ourselves believing all sorts of things in church that we wouldn't let anyone put over on us in the real world.

Søren Kierkegaard said, "Christianity has taken a giant stride into the absurd. Remove from Christianity its ability to shock and it is altogether destroyed. It then becomes a tiny superficial thing, capable neither of inflicting deep wounds nor of healing them."

It's when the absurd starts to sound sensible that we should begin to worry:

"Blessed are the meek..."

"Thou shalt not kill."

"Love your enemies."

"Go, sell all you have and give to the poor."

Be honest now. Blessed are the meek? Try being meek in the world today and see how far you get. Meekness may be fine for church, but in the real world the meek get to go home early with a pink slip and a pat on the back.

As Paul says, when you really hear the gospel – not with Sunday-morning ears, church-trained ears – it can sound foolish indeed – tragically foolish or comically foolish, depending on your point of view.

By the world's standards of what works, and who is greatest, and what is practical, the Christian faith looks foolish indeed.

In this third week of Lent, as the church journeys with Jesus to Jerusalem and the cross, we pause. We stop for a moment to catch our breath and ponder the irony of it all. As the world snickers at the church, we pause with Paul to mock the world.

If everything needs to be reevaluated in light of the cross, the commandments of the Hebrew Bible, read today from Exodus, and the stories of Jesus such as John's gospel account from the temple also need to be seen in a new light. While it may be that there is a certain foolishness these days in having high standards of behaviour as outlined in the Ten Commandments, Paul also announces the foolishness of expecting strict adherence to rules and moralizing to be our salvation. Similarly, Jesus' attempts to tackle abuses and injustices in his world are compellingly foolish, but he must be seen as more than a great mystic teacher leading us down a path of salvation paved by our own activism. To believing Jews Jesus was the Messiah – to believing Gentiles, divine Wisdom. For Paul he is both and he is neither – the cross is the very purpose for which God came into the world as one of us in Jesus of Nazareth.

The good news is not an esoteric body of religious knowledge – not a slickly packaged philosophy – not a scheme for living a better life. Instead, it is an announcement about God's decisive intervention in the world, for the sake of the world. It is an announcement of a world view that clashes with the culturally dominant world view – the good news proclaims Christ crucified.

If you never want to look like a fool, then don't be a Christian, or at least don't make it obvious that you are one of Christ's believers. If you would rather not appear foolish, don't proclaim Christ crucified – don't live from a different point of view – don't see the world, the Creator, everything and everyone in the light of the cross. Christians are without doubt very foolish people. That is how the sophisticated people of the world will always see us. *For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*

Amen.

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