

## **Isaiah 29:13-16, 18-19 (NIV)**

<sup>13</sup>The Lord says: “These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is based on merely human rules they have been taught. <sup>14</sup>Therefore once more I will astound these people with wonder upon wonder; the wisdom of the wise will perish, the intelligence of the intelligent will vanish.” <sup>15</sup>Woe to those who go to great depths to hide their plans from the LORD, who do their work in darkness and think, “Who sees us? Who will know?” <sup>16</sup>You turn things upside down, as if the potter were thought to be like the clay! Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, “You did not make me”? Can the pot say to the potter, “You know nothing”?

<sup>18</sup>In that day the deaf will hear the words of the scroll, and out of gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind will see. <sup>19</sup>Once more the humble will rejoice in the LORD; the needy will rejoice in the Holy One of Israel.

## **1 Cor 1:18-25 (NIV)**

<sup>18</sup>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. <sup>19</sup>For it is written:

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.”

<sup>20</sup>Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? <sup>21</sup>For 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. <sup>22</sup>Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, <sup>23</sup>but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, <sup>24</sup>but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. <sup>25</sup>For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

## Sermon: The Scandal of the Cross

The part of the Easter story that most people struggle with today is the *resurrection*. But in Paul's day, people just couldn't get beyond the *crucifixion* on Good Friday. The cross *itself* was the problem, whether you were Jewish or not. Everyone in the Roman Empire knew what crucifixion entailed. It was a gruesome execution administered by the Romans to make a public example out of slaves and rebels for disturbing the peace. People generally had contempt for this form of excruciating torture, as well as disgust for anyone whose life ended in such a terrible way. The logical thing the early church *should* have done was to quickly glide past the Passion Week and portray Christ's death as an unfortunate episode and speedily move on to the resurrection. But Paul would not let the church in Corinth do that, and neither can we do it today. You see, for Paul, the cross was *not* an embarrassing incident to gloss over, but – irony of ironies – a history-changing event of shame and apparent failure through which God – somehow - rescues the world. When the world has done its worst to the son of God, the very power of God was made evident in weakness.<sup>1</sup> This goes to show how paradoxically *odd* the cross is, both as a symbol and as being foundational to the Christian faith. It is just as odd for us today as it was for the first Christians.

In our reading, Paul writes “Jews demand miracles and Greeks desire wisdom.” This is a caricature, but like most caricatures, it is based on a core of truth. In today's world, we could recast the “Jews” to simply mean “religious people” and “Greeks” to denote “secular people.” Indeed, many church-goers today are “Jews” on Sundays and “Greeks” for the rest of the week. That labelling is one way for us to enter into our text for today. So as we look at Paul's message to the Greeks and Jews in the Corinthian church, may the Spirit use it to speak to us and our place within our contemporary culture this morning.

Corinth was a sophisticated, cosmopolitan city. It was a place noted for its many orators who used their rhetorical skills to amaze, dazzle and persuade the people who lived there. New movements would be born from great oratory. Sometimes the speakers were eloquent and profound, displaying sound, logical, Greek reasoning. At other times it was simply flowery speech through which the cunning speaker manipulated people by clever but phony arguments. One first century writer described Greek wise men in this way: “they croak like frogs in a marsh; they're the most wretched of men, because, though ignorant, they think of themselves wise; they're like peacocks, showing off their reputation and the number of their pupils as peacocks do their tails.”

This is the intoxicating context that Paul established the troubled church to whom he is writing. In 2 Corinthians 10:10 we learn what some people thought of Paul's abilities, “Some say, ‘His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing.’” That's not very flattering! However, what this tells us is that Paul didn't fit into the mold of a great orator and, moreover, *he* knew it. And yet God was able to use that weakness to establish the church at

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor 1:17.

Corinth. Paul's mediocre speaking skill is symbolic of a central theological point of how God works in the world – both then and now; in other words, through human weakness and the things we would call foolishness. But there is an added irony or subtle humor here, in that Paul responds to his critics by displaying both mental brilliance and a high degree of rhetorical proficiency in his writing!

The point is that when Paul came to a secular city like Corinth that prided itself on its intellectual and cultural life, and stood up to speak, either in the synagogue or the marketplace, about Jesus of Nazareth who had been *crucified* by the Romans, but raised from the dead by God and who was now the true Lord the World – not Caesar, he knew what people would think. *This was, and is, the craziest message anybody could imagine.* This wasn't a clever new philosophy; it was foolish madness! It wasn't an appeal to sophisticated culture; it was news of an executed criminal from a despised minority race.

One reason why Paul's message was foolishness to the Greeks was because it went against their understanding of the nature of God. For a Greek, a God who suffered was a contradiction in terms. God, of necessity, was utterly detached and was incapable of experiencing emotion or be affected by the created order. The very idea of "incarnation" was unacceptable to the Greek mind. One thing that they could never have accepted was that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us," as we read in John 1:14. Not only was the incarnation a total impossibility, but Jesus - the so-called "Son of God" *suffered and died!* Paul's message would simply be dismissed or ridiculed, rather than respected.

Nor would the Jewish people themselves enjoy it. Paul knew to Jews it was "*scandalous*" - the Greek word in verse 23 means "*a stumbling stone.*" They never expected the Messiah would be executed by Rome; it should be the other way around, the Messiah killing off the oppressors and liberating Israel! Furthermore, in Deuteronomy 21:23 we read, "Anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse." To a Jew, the fact that Jesus was crucified on a wooden cross proves that he could *not possibly* be God's Anointed One. Jesus, instead of being a *stepping* stone to God, proved to be a *stumbling* stone.

One reason the crucifixion is scandalous to religious people in general, not just to the Jews of Paul's time, is because the cross is offensively irreligious – it is, after all, a symbol of human torture and of *death*. The added irony is that the Christian symbol of an empty cross is the ancient equivalent of the hangman's noose or the electric chair, and you don't see those kind of symbols hanging on a necklace! We would prefer to have a religion based on something like the Transfiguration, a mystical, otherworldly experience, yet one that is somehow undeniable. Not only is a tortuous *death* not a suitable object of devotion for religious people, but the *claims* made for it are too extreme to be acceptable for secular people. So the cross can be a "stumbling block" and the height of absurdity for us too.

One thing the wisdom of this world tells you is, "When you're dead, you're dead." Part of the paradoxical wisdom and power of the cross is expressed in the words of Richard Niebuhr: "The cross does not deny the reality of death; it reinforces it. [But it does] *deny its finality.*" The world's false wisdom is that "death is the end of the story." When we mourn the death of a loved one, or suffer a

major heart attack, we realize first-hand that our life is fleeting – seemingly here today and gone tomorrow. At such times, we come face-to-face with our *own* mortality, which is something - for the most part - we in the West try to deny. That denial of the reality of “death for everyone” is a false wisdom of this age. God challenges us during Lent to confront that false wisdom. The message of the cross, God’s weak and foolish message, absorbs that worldly narrative and transforms into the wholeness of the resurrection. Paul’s message, though counter-cultural is not necessarily anti-intellectual, but recognition of the difference between wisdom and knowledge, and the limits of human reason.

So Paul contrasts the wisdom of the world – whether Jewish or Greek - with the wisdom of God. His basic claim is that the message about Jesus and the cross carries a power of quite a different kind to the persuasive power of human rhetoric. He writes: “*For the message (logos) of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*”<sup>2</sup>

Notice the verb tense here: “who are perishing” and “who are being saved.” There is an apocalyptic – or a final judgement - element to this wording that contrasts these two groups of people. Paul sees *both* the judging *and* saving activity of God as being underway in the *present* moment. He describes the church not as those who “have been” saved or rescued, but those who “are *being*” saved. The subtle distinction is an important part of the problem for those in Corinth who claimed wisdom. It is still true today. Why? Because the world’s wise suppose themselves to be in possession of the *full* truth and, therefore, to have already arrived at wisdom’s destination. For Paul, however, there is more to come; the books of God’s wisdom are not closed yet because God’s Spirit is still at work in the world!

Paul also quotes Isaiah 29 – our Old Testament reading – The Lord says: “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.” The context of this quote is a judgment oracle against the Kingdom of Judah, whose political and religious leaders are trusting in their own wise and seemingly “realistic” plans to protect the Kingdom by making a military alliance with Egypt, instead of listening to the word of the prophet and trusting in God. Isaiah’s point was that God’s action will eventually shut the mouths of the so-called “wise-talkers.” Did Paul recall that *full* context when choosing this particular text to chastise the Corinthians, who were puffed up about their ability to “speak in tongues” and to speak about the things of God with eloquent rhetorical flourish? We may be reasonably sure that he did! Thus, like Judah in Isaiah’s prophecy, Paul is implying the Corinthian church was also under the sentence of divine judgment which would eventually nullify their professed wisdom and unmask their professed piety as a sham. Paul’s written words may be eloquent, but they *sting* too!

In conclusion, Paul contrasts not only “perishing” and “being saved,” and worldly wisdom with God’s wisdom, but also wisdom and foolishness – or *moría* in Greek. What he is claiming is that the Philosophers, Jewish scholars, and the popular pundits of his day all fail to understand what God is

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor 1:18

doing in the world. They are the real morons, says Paul! Those who are being saved, however, recognize the cross for what it is, namely, the power of God at work and which changes the way we understand the world.

Paul, having eloquently chastised the church in Corinth, he writes the following:

<sup>26</sup> *Brothers and sisters*, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. <sup>27</sup> But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. <sup>28</sup> God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things . . . so that no one may boast before him. <sup>30</sup> It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God.”<sup>3</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> 1 Cor 1:26-30a.