

This is All Foolishness

The message of the cross seems foolish to those who are lost and dying. But it is God's power to us who are being saved. It is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of those who are wise. I will do away with the cleverness of those who think they are so smart." (Isaiah 29:14) Where is the wise person? Where is the educated person? Where are the great thinkers of this world? Hasn't God made the wisdom of the world foolish? God wisely planned that the world would not know him through its own wisdom. It pleased God to use the foolish things we preach to save those who believe. Jews require miraculous signs. Greeks look for wisdom. But we preach about Christ and his death on the cross. That is very hard for Jews to accept. And everyone else thinks it's foolish. But there are those God has chosen, both Jews and others. To them Christ is God's power and God's wisdom. The foolish things of God are wiser than human wisdom. The weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

1 Corinthians 1: 18-25 (NIRV)

Paul reminds the people of the words of Isaiah. "It is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of those who are wise. I will do away with the cleverness of those who think they are so smart.'"

This is a strange choice of scripture to quote considering who he was writing to. Paul had been to the pagan city of Corinth. He was aware that the citizens there prided themselves on their cultural and intellectual life. Here are the greatest thinkers of the world. They make sense of the great questions of the world using critical systematic rational arguments called philosophy, or literally "the love of wisdom."

So Paul is faced with contrasting "the wisdom of the world" with "the wisdom of God" His message is that the Messiah and his cross carry a power much different from the power of the cleverest of humans.

"Let me remind you again of the good news of the God who died in a trash heap on the wrong side of the empire", Paul says. The God who overthrows the status and power of this world by announcing his Kingdom is at hand. A kingdom where the weak and the foolish are just as welcome, or even more so than the strong and the wise.

"You think you have it all figured out," Paul says," but you don't. Let me remind you about the king I told you about when I visited you last." Of Jesus of Nazareth who was killed by the Romans but then God raised him back to life and now he is Lord of the world.

How do you think the earthly wise heard Paul's message? He knew what they would think, that this is the craziest message anyone could dream up. This isn't a smart new wisdom, it is madness. The Lord of all is an executed criminal from a despised race.¹ It is complete foolishness.

Paul also addresses the Jews living in Corinth in this letter. Paul knew that this story of the Christ was a 'scandal' to them. No Jew of his time was expecting a Messiah who would be executed by Rome; a Messiah ought to be defending the pagans, not being killed by them!² Even to the Jews this message of a weak and helpless saviour was complete foolishness.

Well two thousand years have passed, we have had some time to gain some real wisdom. We are of course much smarter than those first century Corinthians. We here in Stratford live in a city of even greater culture and intelligence. Look at our culture, the theatre, the music, the restaurants. Look at the advancements we have made in

¹ Wright, N.T. (2004), "Paul for Everyone: 1 Corinthians", Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville pp 10-14.

² ibid

industry and agriculture, why we even can boast of a University and how we are one of the seven most intelligent communities in the world. We can rest knowing that we have got it going on! And of course we understand the Christ Paul describes don't we? We have the answers.

In our local paper the last few weeks. The great debaters of our current place and time have sent letters to the editor arguing about whether the Lord's prayer should or should not be used to begin county council meetings. In response to a letter that suggested the Hampstead tragic accident was the result of God's anger over eliminating the prayer, yesterday's letter even took on a rhetorical flare matching that of the Corinthians. They wrote:

I read with interest a letter online, titled "Lord's Prayer Protects Us", where the writer essentially blamed the tragic deaths of the victims in Hampstead on Perth East council for choosing not to recite the Lord's Prayer before their meetings.

This gave me something of a "revelation." I believe it's high time we, as concerned citizens, petition the government to enact changes to the Highway Traffic Act mandating that all council meetings province wide begin with the Lord's Prayer. Imagine the millions in tax dollars that could be saved from lower health-care costs and also the untold number of innocent victims' lives council members could save that God kills when they ignore Him.³

Following this current prayer debate I can almost hear Paul saying, "Hasn't God made the wisdom of the world foolish? God wisely planned that the world would not know him through its own wisdom.

In one of the recent "living the questions" adult education sessions, our study group, was looking at the omnipotence of God. The question we found ourselves exploring was, "how can our loving God be all-powerful and there still be so much pain in the world?"

We tried to explain it away and someone suggested that it is because God has given us free will or freedom of choice and that we, not God, create our own pain. Someone else exclaimed, "but that doesn't explain a natural disaster like an earthquake. Humanity can't be blamed for that!"

I admit I struggle with this question as much as anyone. It seems that knowledge of the power of God is ingrained in us.

We pray to *almighty* God.

We confess that, "we believe in God the father *almighty*."

We are taught about a God who can in a word, create order from chaos.

In anger can flood creation or turn someone to salt.

With a promise can bring life from a barren womb.

We even learn of God as man who can take scarce provisions and feed thousands, walk on water, and raise the dead.

We must admit this is a God we want to believe in, need to believe in. But a God created by earthly wisdom. What would our God be if not an all powerful source in this world? Can we even imagine what that God might look like? Completely abandoned by his followers, beaten by worldly rulers, bloodied, broken, and taking it all in complete submission to a greater power and wisdom than those of this world.

Can we imagine that God? We should be able to for that weak, vulnerable and helpless God is Christ crucified.

Oh how foolish our faith looks to the world. Paul writes, that the message of the cross seems foolish to those who are lost and dying. but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

³ Paraphrased from <http://www.stratfordbeaconherald.com/ArticleDisplay.aspx?e=3496679> Accessed March 9, 2012

But who wants to preach about that. No one wants to hear about the cross when the “health and wealth” gospel will pack a stadium with eager listeners and glue tens of thousands of hopeful viewers to their television sets? The message of the cross doesn’t go over well to “spiritual customers” looking for a church to provide a service that meets their needs.

But Paul tells us that God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom. We know better but sometimes we fool ourselves into believing that we can rely on our own abilities, our own expertise, our own planning and sophistication. Yet in the shadow of the cross, such “wisdom” and attempts at control do seem foolish.

God’s foolishness in the cross calls into question what we value.

So often we are star-struck by the beautiful, the popular, and the wealthy; but the cross is ugly, unpopular, and poor, representing the very poverty of Christ, who is emptied for the sins of the world.

We are impressed with violent, ravenous power, but the cross means nonviolent self-giving.

We are mesmerized by the eloquent, but the cross speaks God’s strange power and wisdom.

For Christians, the cross declares that we embrace truth when lies seem easier,

gentleness when force is attractive,

justice for the oppressed when maintaining status quo would be simpler,

generosity when hoarding would be more comfortable,

forgiving when a hateful grudge would taste so good.⁴

Paul brings in Isaiah, a much more eloquent voice than his, to remind the Corinthians that God has often been in the business of confounding the wise and stopping up the tongues of the eloquent in order to teach what God’s wisdom looks like, to subvert wisdom and power in order to offer another kind of wisdom and power.⁵

Paul’s ancient words to the people in Corinth are just as full of truth today for us in Stratford. Words telling us that God, through Christ Jesus, offer us another kind of wisdom, a wisdom that is deep and true, a wisdom that is not concerned with appearance or association.

God’s wisdom is willing to be mocked, to be shamed and understood as foolishness. God’s wisdom is willing to take the blows of violent power and the slurs of arrogant wisdom in order to make clear that the things of violence and arrogance will not last, but what will last is the foolish proclamation that power can serve and wisdom is found in powerless vulnerability.

Blessed are those who seek after God’s foolishness, God’s weakness, for there you shall find wisdom and redemption. There you shall find yourself a strange anomaly, but fully alive.⁶

Amen.

⁴ Paschal, Jeff (2008) in “Feasting on the Word” Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, pp 87-91

⁵ Cole, Brian (2012) “Foolish Wisdom” http://day1.org/3634-foolish_wisdom, accessed March 9, 2012

⁶ Ibid