

Sunday March 7th 2021: The Foolishness of the Cross – 1 Corinthians 1.18-25

Today is the third Sunday of Lent - and as we get closer to Easter so the Cross starts to come into focus. But how should we understand the Cross? For St Paul, *the Cross is foolishness to those who are perishing but to those who are being saved it is the power and wisdom of God*¹. But what does he mean by *foolishness*, exactly? Perhaps he's saying that the only safe place to stand is on the scandalous, counter-intuitive² message of the Cross. For if we look at the Cross through the eyes of someone living in the first century any message based upon the cross would be shocking indeed. It was a message which tripped people up then and it trips people up today. St Peter likens the message of the Gospel, of Christ crucified, as to *a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence*³ and yet, according to St Paul, it's the Truth. Winston Churchill once said: *men stumble over truth from time to time but most pick themselves up and hurry off as if nothing has happened*⁴. The Cross is like that – it offends – it confuses - we trip over it - and sometimes just hurry off. Nevertheless the Cross lies at the very heart of the Gospel.

The paradox is that the Cross is the last place we would expect to find wisdom and power, God's or anyone else's. A message with the Cross at its centre isn't a message geared to win friends and influence people⁵. We only have to look at the realities of crucifixion to see this. Crucifixion was the enactment of capital punishment meted out by the Roman Empire. It was reserved for disreputable individuals or groups - rebellious slaves, pirates, thieves, robbers & murderers, dissidents & insurrectionists who threatened the social order. Crucifixion was the imperial instrument used to suppress subversion. It was geared to shame, degrade, humiliate, and torture its victims before, during, and sometimes even after death. The cross came with a warning: *crossing Rome can seriously damage your health*⁶. And if that wasn't enough, Judaism itself condemned crucifixion as a sign of divine curse⁷.

Yet here is St Paul openly, boldly, and simply proclaiming the Cross as the intentional and exclusive means by which humanity is saved. But not saved from the tyranny of Rome. No, not at all – his brief is much wider. It embraces the whole of humanity and its need to be saved from itself; from its own nature and the outworking of that nature in real life; its effect on the real world. In short, the Cross addresses the question of sin within and tragedy without⁸.

Someone once said: *the problems of the world lie in the heart of each individual*. This may well be true but it's a truth most of us don't really want to hear. (Surely it's other people who do bad things - not us. Isn't it?) But the Cross cuts like a scalpel and gets to the heart of the matter. It hurts – and that's why it's offensive. St Paul reminds us that we have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God⁹. The Cross both embarrasses and embraces humanity – including us. So, though its good news it's not particularly welcome news. C S Lewis was someone who understood this very well. He referred to himself as “the most reluctant convert in the whole of England”¹⁰.

The message of the Cross is not for the proud heart. It is however slightly different when it comes to the poor in spirit. These are the low whom Jesus rescues from the sin which they know lies deep within their heart. That is why they are blessed: *Blessed are the poor in spirit* says Jesus in the opening lines of the sermon on the mount ¹¹. For only the poor in spirit can really *see*. They receive, accept and embrace the gospel as they accept the solution to a problem: because it's rational to do so – because the Cross is the answer to the problem of *themselves*: the problem of their own human nature.

The embarrassing action of the Cross also stands over against humanity's unaided search for God through religion and philosophy. *The Jews demand a sign and Greeks seek after wisdom*, says St Paul¹². Our minds are immediately drawn to the signs demanded of Jesus during his ministry¹³ or Paul's encounter with the stoics and epicureans in Athens¹⁴. Consequently, he says, the Cross becomes offensive to Jews and totally confusing to Greeks, by which he means gentile culture. In the Cross the best and brightest of human efforts to understand the world are neutralised. The Cross, as it were, out-manoeuvres human attempts to know God. At the same time, the Cross becomes the epistemic key ¹⁵ (the key of knowledge) which enables us to understanding our relationship to God in Christ. So, rather than being a theological treasure map to the divine or just another piece of poorly thought out human wisdom, the Cross provides those who can receive it with an authentic *experience*: the experience of encountering God anew in the place of God's choosing and according to God's wisdom. The Gospel turns everything on its head - and through what the world considers foolish makes foolish the wisdom of the world.

St Paul was an intellectual who had a clear understanding of the culture in which he operated in a way that most of us today don't have. Though every generation is necessarily immersed in its own culture, most of us would, if asked, struggle to define our culture and put it into words ¹⁶ – trace its history, say where it comes from and why. We imbibe cultural norms the same way we read a novel: subconsciously, without bothering to search out the author's cultural perspective or her motive or any hidden meaning. Thus culture is often imported into our minds without our ever being consciously aware of it. But understanding the culture is very important for the modern Christian because, as in every age, Christians must engage with the culture and the Cross if often at odds with it somewhere along the line.

Today we live in an age of unprecedented knowledge. We have amazing literature, the accumulated wisdom of centuries, the latest discoveries of science and medicine. And we're tempted to put our faith in these things. Yet, great as some of these things are, none of them can bear the weight of the world – it's brokenness; either the brokenness without or within. Human wisdom, unaided, cannot bring us closer to God. And this is the point St Paul is making. Defining our spirituality by emphasizing our health, looks and longevity, saving the planet, even being tolerant and kind, whatever it is – though these may be good in themselves – to put them first is to put the cart before the horse. Even good things are good because they are dependent.

They emanate *from* a knowledge of God but cannot, of themselves, bring us *to* a knowledge of God. This can come only by God's grace.

When we grasp this, we start to see that the Cross is the place where human pride is supremely challenged. That's why of the seven deadly sins ¹⁷ pride always tops the list. In the Cross our God as Saviour stoops to conquer, yet the proud spirit sees in it only weakness and confusion. Indeed human wisdom can never attain to such wisdom. It turns out that the most important message in the world is one we'd never figure out for ourselves because it runs opposite to the way we think; it's counter-intuitive.

The question for us today then, as we proceed on our Easter journey is *not* whether we can become ever wiser and knowledgeable and save the world by our own understanding and effort. Rather the question is whether we can stoop low enough to receive the foolish message of the Cross. Only the poor in spirit can do it. It's *not just* good news for the low, but only the low can receive it. When we realize we're low we're in a perfect position for Christ to raise us up through the power of the Cross....

As Martin Luther once said:

*Christ saves no-one but sinners.
He instructs no-one but the foolish and stupid.
He enriches none but paupers.
And he makes alive only the dead* ¹⁸.

References

1 1 Corinthians 1.18 – see also Appendix 1

2 Counter-intuitive - contrary to intuition or common-sense expectation (but often true nevertheless).

3 *A stone of stumbling and a rock of offence* 1 Peter 2.8 quoting Isaiah 8.14

4 Most but not all. *Winston Churchill His Wit and Wisdom: selections from his Works and Speeches* Introduction by Jack House publisher: Collins Date unknown.

5 An oblique reference to *How to Win Friends and Influence People* – Dale Carnegie 1936 Copyright renewed 1964. Reprinted Chancellor Press 1998

6 As in a government health warning on a packet of Woodbines.

7 Reference Deuteronomy 21.18

8 Cf. *The Faith that Rebels* – D S Cairns SCM 1927.

9 Romans 3.23.

10 *A Most Reluctant Convert: C S Lewis's Journey to Faith* David C. Downing IVP 2004

11 The Beatitudes: Matthew 5:3

12 1 Corinthians 1: 22

13 Mark 8:11-13

14 Acts 17: 16-34

15 Epistemology – the study of knowledge: do we know things? how do we know things? how do we know that we know things? On *Rationality* See Alvin Plantinga *Warrant and Proper Function* Oxford University Press 1993- Especially chapter 12 *Is Naturalism Irrational?* (for Naturalism see Appendix 2 below).

16 See James W Sire *The Universe Next Door: A Basic World-view Catalogue* IVP Academic 2009 from which I have produced a simplified table - Appendix 2

17 The seven deadly sins: According to the standard list are pride, greed, wrath, envy, lust, gluttony, and sloth, which are contrary to the seven cardinal + infused virtues (prudence, justice, fortitude, temperance) + (faith, hope and charity).

18 Martin Luther –Quoted in *The Scandal of the Cross* Dashhouse March 30th 2018

Appendix 1 - The Foolishness of God.

God reveals himself to us in ways religious and non-religious. For example, the match between our noetic structures and the world, what Thomas Aquinas called the *adequatio intellectus ad rem* (literally, 'making even the mind to the matter'), allows us to discern the intelligence embedded in our mathematically precise universe. Intelligibility becomes a signal of transcendence in the human condition and the lawfulness of nature stands as an example of the universe's astonishing order and complexity. Further, we often see the image of God in other people; through the baptised imagination by way of literature, poetry and myth; in languages such as mathematics; in information systems like DNA; and in the wonder and beauty of of the natural world. St Paul refers to these as natural revelations: *For what can be known about God is plain...because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature...has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made* (Romans 1.15). Nevertheless despite all this we often seem content to acquiesce in the existentialist claim (Jean Paul Sartre et al) that life is ultimately absurd and the message of the Cross is reserved the for the foolish and ignorant.

But if this is so then the foolish and ignorant are in good company ¹. Great scientists and philosophers have been among those who see divine ordering in the world. The great Newton once said: *he who thinks half-heartedly cannot believe... but he who really thinks has to believe...* The 20th century quantum physicist Werner Heisenberg ² echoed Newton when he said: *The first gulp from the glass of natural sciences will turn you into an atheist, but at the bottom of the glass God is waiting for you...* Albert Einstein referred our ability to comprehend nature a miracle and the harmony of natural law a revealing an intelligence vastly superior to our own.³

From a religious perspective God reveals himself in his Word, in his chosen people and, paradigmatically, in the Cross. The Cross may appear foolish – but the contention of the Gospel is that it is by what the world considers foolish that God makes foolish the wisdom of the world. Only the poor in spirit have the necessary spiritual discernment yet, being poor in spirit, they do not boast. Thus in the Cross, humility trumps pride; the message of the Cross is checkmate for human nature. And sometimes the greatest thinkers have the greatest humility: Newton again: *When I lay my telescope aside, go into my room, shut the door, and get down on my knees in earnest prayer, I see more of Heaven and feel closer to the Lord than if I were assisted by all the telescopes on earth...*⁴

Footnotes

1 See Appendix 3 – A Few Quotations

2 Werner Heisenberg in Ulrich Hildebrand. 1988. “Das Universum - Hinweis auf Gott?” in *Ethos* (die Zeitschrift für die ganze Fam-ilie), No. 10, Oktober. In 1927 Heisenberg famously articulated the Uncertainty or Indeterminacy Principle

3 *Out of My Later Years* Essay no. 8 *Physics and Reality*.

4 *Knight's Master Book of New Illustrations* (New York: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company 1956).

Appendix 2 : Overview: historical development of worldviews – where did we go wrong?

*For us to be fully conscious intellectually, we must not only be able to detect the world-view of others but we must be aware of our own; why it is ours and why, in the light of so many options, we think it's true. James W. Sire in *The Universe Next Door*.*

World-view	Basic Idea	People	Period	Paradigm Shift
Christian theism	A universe charged with the grandeur of God	Early church fathers to Aquinas	Pre-modern world prior to 17 th century	1 A pre-modern concern for a just society based upon the revelation of a just God
Deism	The clockwork universe	Descartes to John Locke	The scientific revolution 17 th century. Newton	shifts to...
Naturalism	The silence of infinite space	David Hume Immanuel Kant	18 th century. The Enlightenment. The Age of Reason. Birth of the Modern Age 1750-1960	2 17 th + 18 th century. A modern attempt to use Reason as a guide to justice; with emphasis on Reason + metanarratives (e.g. Marxism)
Nihilism	Zero Point: all is meaningless	Nietzsche	Late 19 th century	shifts to...
Existentialism	Beyond Nihilism	Kierkegaard Sartre Camus	19 th century 20 th century	3 A postmodernist despair of any universal standard for justice:
Eastern Mysticism	Journey to the East	Herman Hesse	20 th century Post 1960's	universal democracy to post modern
New Age Spirituality	Spirituality without religion	Marilyn Fergusson Capra Wilber and Cohen	1970's	privileging of the self defining values of individuals and communities (and a formula for anarchy)
Postmodernism	The vanished horizon	Jacques Derrida Michel Foucault Jean Francois Lyotard	1971- present	

Progress means getting closer to the place you want to be. And if you have taken a wrong turn going forward doesn't get you any nearer. If you are on the wrong road, progress means turning round and walking back to the right road. And in that case the man who turns back soonest is the most progressive man. C S Lewis.

Appendix 3 – A Handful of Quotations

“I think its pretty much agreed that all that God business is out the window.”

Dismissing the topic as easily as he tipped the chair back from the seminar-room table, our senior colleague continued his brief, articulate review of the leading theories of consciousness. Who agreed to that? I wondered. Who agreed to that?

Dr Linda S. Schwab, Centre for Brain Research, University of Rochester. Quoted in *On the Seventh Day: Forty Scientists and Academics Explain Why They Believe in God* John F Ashton (Green Forest AR, Master Books 2002)

If we regard God's world as a site of purpose and intention and accept that we, as contemplative surveyors of the universe, are included in that intention, then the vision is incomplete without a role for divine communication, a place for God both as Creator-Sustainer and as Redeemer...

Dr. Owen Gingerich. Harvard astronomer and former research professor of Astronomy and History of Science at Harvard University, and senior astronomer emeritus at the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory – in Owen Gingerich *God's Universe* (Boston: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, First Edition 2006) pp120-121. And according to Nick Poole-Wilson “... a very nice man.”

It is not difficult for me to have this faith, for it is incontrovertible that where there is a plan there is intelligence – an orderly unfolding universe testifies to the truth of perhaps the most majestic statement ever uttered: “...in the beginning God.”

Arthur H Compton Nobel Prize (physics) University of Chicago – extract from *Chicago Daily News* April 12th 1936.

*The scientist's religious feeling takes the form of a rapturous amazement at the harmony of natural law, which reveals an intelligence of such superiority that, compared with it, all the systematic thinking and acting of human beings is an absolutely insignificant reflection... I defend the Good God against the idea of a continuous game of dice. **Albert Einstein**.*

Pierre Speziali ed. *Albert Einstein – Michele Basso Correspondence 1903 -1955* (Paris Herman 1972)

The supreme God exists necessarily and by the same necessity he exists always and everywhere...He endureth forever and is everywhere present; and by existing always and everywhere, He constitutes duration and space ... in Him are all things contained and moved.

Isaac Newton in H S Thayer ed. *Newton's Philosophy of Nature* (New York: Hafner 1953) p45

Everything in the world shows either the unhappy condition of man or the mercy of God; either the weakness of man without God or the power of man assisted by God -

Blaise Pascal, mathematician, physicist, inventor, philosopher, writer and Catholic theologian in *Thoughts on Religion and Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Otto Schulze & Co. 1920)

To postulate a trillion trillion universes instead of one God seems the height of irrationality –

Richard Swinburne Emeritus Professor of Philosophy University of Oxford

*A faith without some doubts is like a human body without any antibodies in it. People who blithely go through life too busy or indifferent to ask hard questions about why they believe as they do will find themselves defenceless against either the experience of tragedy or the probing questions of a smart sceptic. **Tim Keller** quoted by Max Davis *The Insanity of Unbelief: A Journalist's Journey from Belief to Scepticism to Deep Faith* - Kindle Edition.*

*A rationalist who derides faith as belief without proof merely derides himself ... for Reason itself is a matter of faith: Faith that there's a match between my noetic structure and the world; faith that my thoughts bear any relation at all to reality – **G K Chesterton***

If the universe has no meaning we should never have found out that it has no meaning – C S Lewis

...I'm not much with people, and I'm not a family man. I want my peace. I want to know how God created this world. I am not interested in this or that phenomenon in the spectrum of this or that element. I want to know His thoughts, the rest are details.

Albert Einstein, Nobel Prize (Physics) in R Clarck's *The Life and Times of Einstein* (New York World Publishing Co. 1971)

...Jesus ushers in the Kingdom of God which...includes outer as well as inner blessings, the abolition of both sin within and tragedy without.. D S Cairns the Russell Lectures New York 1923