

Power and wisdom

I mentioned last week that the final verse of the reading from 1 Corinthians we had was my favourite verse in all of scripture. Well, I think that our lectionary compilers agree with me, because the first verse of this week's reading is the same verse.

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. (1:18)

We know the message of the cross – the gospel, the good news of how Jesus died for us, but why does the message it have these two very different consequences – perishing on one hand, and being saved on the other?

Why would people regard the message of the cross as foolishness? Well, think about how it might sound to an outsider: God who created all things, who is all powerful, chooses to become incarnate – to send his only begotten son into his own creation. God's son lives as a human being. This son taught about the kingdom of God, he healed the sick, he turned water into wine, fed multitudes, walked on water and even raised the dead. But despite all of that, the people rejected him, and the son of God allowed himself to be betrayed, beaten, and crucified.

That's not what you might expect of the son of God, is it? It's crazy stuff. I get that people regard it as foolishness. But if you understand the story, if you get to know why these things happened, and the consequences of them happening... you can know that Jesus died for you because he loves you, and in his resurrection he opens the way to new and everlasting life for those who put our trust in him.

The message of the cross is truly the power of God... but sadly, not everyone 'gets it.'

Hopefully, we know the message of the cross as the power of God. But sometimes we might question, or doubt. Sometimes we might even be embarrassed by the message of the cross. The message of the cross doesn't sit well with the ideas and the philosophies and the views of most people today. For most people in the world, for people who haven't heard, or who have been taught something else, or who have rejected Jesus, or have been led astray, the message of the cross is foolishness.

But such attitudes aren't new: In verse 22 Paul tells us that "Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom."

The Jews stumbled over the message of the cross because Jesus wasn't the kind of saviour or Messiah they wanted. And remember that the nation of Israel was God's chosen people: Delivered from slavery in Egypt, led to the promised land. God had been their God, and they had been God's people. God had given them judges and prophets and kings. And God had promised them a messiah.

But when the Messiah came, they rejected him.

And we wonder why they didn't receive him? Paul tells us that was because the "Jews demand[ed] signs..." They were expecting a Messiah who would perform miracles on their behalf.

And while Jesus did perform miracles - giving sight to the blind, making the lame walk, cleansing lepers, feeding multitudes with bread and fish, those weren't the kinds of miracles that the people wanted: They wanted signs of power and success. They wanted a Messiah who would re-establish the Kingdom of Israel like it was at the time of King David.

If he had inspired and led an army into battle and defeated the Romans - if he would have shown them that he was successful and victorious - they would have marched behind him and hailed him as messiah.

But instead, Jesus allowed himself to be handed over to his enemies, to be stripped and beaten, to be humiliated, and to be raised up on the cross and crucified.

To the Jewish people at, dying on a cross wasn't success. It wasn't a victory. It wasn't what they thought their long-awaited Messiah would do.

But not only did they have the wrong expectation of what the Messiah would do, they also had the wrong idea about salvation: They thought that the way to salvation was through their own birthright (being God's chosen people) and through keeping the Jewish law.

They thought that by being good people, earnestly keeping God's commandments, and all the supplementary laws that had developed over time, that they could earn God's favour.

And at one level they were just going through the motions, going to the synagogue at the appointed times, saying their prayers loudly, and giving their offerings publicly so everybody was impressed with their generosity. They were outwardly pious and prayerful and generous - but all that came from misguided hope that those things would earn them a reward from God.

But if that's the way to God's favour, it follows that they didn't think they needed someone to save them. So as a result, they kept stumbling over the message of the cross.

They thought they could do it all themselves. Just like many people today do. If you don't need saving, then it follows that you don't need a saviour. But if we're honest with ourselves, we find that we can't fix all the problems of our own lives, let alone all the problems of the world. People need help. We need help. We need the message of the cross - we need Jesus.

While Paul tells us that the Jews demanded signs, he tells us that the Greeks looked for wisdom (1:22). The Greeks had many philosophers - Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and so on. Great thinkers. Acts chapter 17 describes what it was like in Athens: The Athenian philosophers met at the Areopagus, and Luke writes that they "spent their time doing

nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.” (Acts 17:21). The first century equivalent of TED talks, perhaps... but day after day after day.

They talked about and listened to the latest ideas. That was what the Greeks valued - contemplation, thinking and understanding, reason and logic was central. The world, they held, would get better through thinking and through gaining knowledge.

I don't want to say such things are bad, or even that they're not valuable, because it's obvious that such thinking has led great advancements in the world – in society and health in particular... but we should remember also in warfare, and less obviously bad things such as the decision to add tetraethyl lead to petrol, or to use DDT as an insecticide.

This idea of progress through knowledge and learning that the Greeks embraced sounds familiar, because it continues into the present day. The world is becoming more and more educated. There is more and more knowledge, and it is easier and easier to access that knowledge. Many things are indeed getting better.

In the last 80 years, extreme poverty across the world has dropped by 40%, worldwide child mortality has fallen from 1 in 4 to 1 in 20 and global life expectancy has increased by nearly 30 years.

But look at the world around us. Things aren't always getting better, and for many people in many places things are getting worse.

Do people really think that they can solve all the problems of the world themselves. Through making themselves – and presumably each other – “better”? For many people in Paul's time, and for even more people today, the answer seems to be 'yes'.

If people are preoccupied with being sensible and logical, when they hear the message of the cross, how do you they react? The story of Jesus is easily dismissed – the all-powerful God who sends his son to die? People being raised from the dead?

So the Greeks, the philosophers, regarded the message of the cross as foolishness. They didn't need a saviour, because, in their thinking, everybody could just make themselves better.

Two thousand years later, there's no shortage of YouTube videos of people explaining how the gospel is foolish, books explaining the same thing have been popular for years, people go on lecture tours that make fun of Christianity, and thousands turn up to listen.

People are still laughing at the wisdom of God, treating it as foolishness.

The message of the cross might be foolish to the world at large, but we, as followers of Jesus, hold that the message of the cross IS the power of God.

We need to take that to heart. Because in the face of mockery and derision, it can be easy for us to downplay our faith. To de-emphasise the more 'out there' parts of scripture, or explain them away in logical terms, or claim that things are metaphorical

or symbolic. In effect, applying the 'wisdom of the world' to the things of God. We're trying to make a faith, a picture of Jesus, a picture of God, which might appease outsiders, rather than being honest and truthful in our faith.

Jesus isn't a product to be packaged and sold. The hope that we have in Jesus is not something to be marketed against other faiths and philosophies, because people today are like the Jews and Greeks of Paul's time.

Just like the Jews demanded signs, some people demand miracles of God. People are disillusioned when prayers aren't answered in the way that they want them answered.

They want God to be what they want him to be – a genie who grants wishes, perhaps, or a cosmic policeman who punishes people who they perceive to do wrong, or a warm and fuzzy force that lets everything go on - not who God has revealed himself to be. Have you ever heard someone say "I don't believe in a God who would [do this thing]" or "The God I believe in would not [do this other thing]?"

And just like the Greeks who looked for earthly wisdom, there are those who try to find meaning to life through contemplation, through philosophising, through self-improvement.

As they do that, some people – even people within the church – will seek to change our understanding of the scriptures accordingly. To say he was a wise teacher, and perhaps even an example for us, but not a saviour.

For so many people in the world today, the message of the cross becomes foolishness.

Paul quotes Isaiah (29:14) when he says, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate." (1:19).

In the face of what God has done for us in the death of Jesus, human wisdom is swept aside, and human intelligence can't make sense of it.

So all the traditional sources of authority – wisdom, the law and logic don't explain the message of the cross "Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age?" (1:20) Paul asks.

Then Paul points to Jesus – "but we preach Christ crucified" (1:23) – the power of God and the wisdom of God.

Jesus, Christ crucified, is who and what brings us together as Christians. We use the cross as a symbol. But the message of the cross, Jesus' death on that cross at Calvary, his death for each one of us and for all of us, is what is most important:

Mark's gospel tells us that: For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45)

And Paul in his letter to the Romans: God presented [Jesus] as a sacrifice of atonement, though faith in his blood (Romans 3:25a)

The message of the cross is clear. Jesus' death on the cross sets us free from the burden of sin. The price has been paid. All we need do is turn to him in faith.

We need though, to think about where we stand when we contemplate the message of the cross – do we demand signs? Do we look for wisdom? Do we try to find our own way to salvation? Has the message of the cross become foolishness? Or do we hold it in our hearts as the power of God?

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.

Amen.