

The power of the cross

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[0 : 00] What we call today Good Friday is called Good Friday because we remember what Jesus did on the cross. And the cross is, of course, recognized as the symbol of Christianity.

The Christian faith has always been represented by a cross because it is on a cross that Jesus died. And yet for so many people, the cross makes absolutely no sense.

But then the message of the cross has always been mocked, has always been ridiculed, mocked as a symbol of foolishness and of weakness.

And an example of this comes from an early piece of graffiti scratched into a wall on Rome's Palatine Hill. It is graffiti, so don't blame me if you can't see it.

It is a caricature. It is a cartoon of the crucifixion. It is a rough drawing and if you can make it out, it shows a man stretched out on a cross.

[1 : 01] And he has got the head of a donkey. Beside the cross, there is another man with one arm raised in worship. And scribbled underneath the drawings are the words, Alex Amenos. Alex Amenos worships his God.

And that early piece of graffiti mocking the death of Jesus on a cross is now displayed in a museum in Rome. And it essentially sums up how many in this world regard the Christian message.

The message that Jesus, Son of God, died to take the punishment for the sins of any who will trust in him. That notion has always seemed absurd to the ears and to the minds of people in this world.

And so when Paul wrote to the Corinthians about Christ crucified, he was writing to cosmopolitan, to cultured, and to clever people.

Because Corinth was a city that was characterized by wisdom, not by foolishness. It was characterized by power and strength, not by weakness.

[2 : 16] Corinth was full of sophisticated people who loved success. And yet Christ crucified into that context sounded like a message of shame and defeat.

Just as it does for many people today. And yet Paul tells how the message of the cross completely subverts this world's way of doing things.

Because Paul says that Christ crucified is in fact the wisdom and the power of God. And so tonight we will reflect briefly on the message of the cross.

Because there are two ways of looking at the cross. Two ways of seeing it. Listen to how Paul began that reading. 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. So the message of the cross is foolishness. It's foolishness to those who are perishing, he says.

[3 : 20] But the message of the cross is also the power of God. It is the power of God to those who are being saved, he says. So two different ways of seeing the cross, two different perspectives on the cross.

For some, it's nonsense. For others, it's necessary. Because the cross is God's way of saving people, including you and me. But the question is, well, what do we need to be saved from? We need to be saved from God's punishment for our sin, which will ultimately take us to hell.

Which is a place of eternal separation from God. And the only way to be saved from hell is to have our sins forgiven through Jesus' death on the cross. And that is why the message of the cross is seen as foolishness to some. It's not just odd, it's also offensive to suggest that the cross is the only thing that can save you and me and the people of this world from the danger that we're in. And this message didn't go down well in first century Corinth. And so it's hardly surprising that it doesn't go down well today. The message of the cross continues to be mocked and ridiculed, seen as idiotic, insulting, and irrelevant for modern people. Listen to what Richard Dawkins said about the cross in his book, *The God's Delusion*. He says,

I have described atonement, the central doctrine of Christianity, as vicious, sadomasochistic, and repellent. We should also dismiss it as barking mad. He continues, if God wanted to forgive our sins, why not just forgive them? But what Paul is saying here is that God doesn't work according to our human wisdom. He doesn't do things the way we think he should do things. And so Paul then quotes from the prophet Isaiah. He says, for it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, the intelligence of the intelligent. I will frustrate. Paul's saying that God's ways of working have always defied human wisdom and knowledge and understanding. And that's why the death of Jesus on the cross thwarts human wisdom and knowledge and understanding. And that's why Paul says, 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? He's saying that God shatters every pretension to wisdom, whether it be the Jewish intellectual, the teacher of the law, or whether it be the Greek intellectual, the philosopher of this age.

[6 : 26] He's saying God surpasses all human wisdom and intelligence. And so it doesn't matter, is always going to conclude that the cross of Jesus Christ is foolish.

And that's why Paul speaks with irony. He says, 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. He's saying that God saves people God's way, not a human way, not according to our wisdom.

And so we will never receive God's salvation through our wisdom and intellect. We will only receive it by believing in the message of the cross. It is profoundly simple and yet simply profound at the same time.

It seems too simple to say that believing in Christ crucified is how we are accepted by God. It defies all of our human logic, all of our human values, all of our human ways of thinking about how things should work. Because we like to think we have the ability to save ourselves through our own achievements, through our good works. And the cross tells us, no, all of that counts for nothing with God. All of our human efforts, all of our human striving can't help us. It is only through the cross that we can be saved. And so Paul expands on why this message, the message of the cross, was a barrier to Jews and Greeks. He says, Jews demanded signs and Greeks looked for wisdom. So for the Jews, power is what mattered. That was their cultural background. So from their scriptures, they knew all about God's mighty power, all about God's strength. And so they looked for more power.

[8 : 38] They demanded signs and miracles as an indication that God was at work. And then there's the Greeks. For the Greeks, wisdom is what mattered. That was part of their cultural background. And so from their history, they had great philosophers like Socrates and Plato and Aristotle. And so they were looking for rational debate, for logic, for rhetorical skills, for knowledge. The Jews and the Greeks had different cultures and they were looking for different cultures. And so Christ crucified didn't fit into their worldviews, either one that emphasized power or one that emphasized wisdom. And that's why Paul says, but we preach Christ crucified, stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.

Christ crucified was a stumbling block to Jews. The word here is scandalon in the original, where we get our word scandal from. And so the Jews thought it was scandalous to accept a crucified Messiah. When power is your thing, why believe in someone who dies on a cross? Doesn't make any sense. And Christ crucified lacked credibility to the Gentiles. They couldn't accept it intellectually. How does this all add up? They demanded a far more sophisticated, smart, clever message than Christ crucified. They couldn't take Christ crucified seriously. And yet the message of the cross today still continues to be a barrier for people.

And they reject Christianity for exactly the same reasons, thinking that Christianity lacks the powerful signs to prove that it's true. And so people say, well, God, if only you did some amazing miracle right before my eyes, right in front of me, well, then I'd believe. Or people think Christianity lacks intelligent argument to prove that it's true. And so people say, well, if only I had satisfactory answers to all of my difficult questions, if they could be answered, well, then I'd believe, I'd be convinced.

And so that's why Christ crucified is something totally and utterly bizarre. And yet this is where Christianity subverts the ways of thinking in this world. Because the very reasons given by the Jews and the Gentiles for rejecting Jesus show that Jesus is actually the one they're really looking for.

Paul says, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. So the Jews were looking for something. They were looking for power. Paul says, Jesus is that something. Jesus is the power of God. And the Greeks, they were looking for something, wisdom. And Paul says that Jesus is that something. Jesus is the wisdom of God. And so their longings for power and for wisdom essentially are echoes of a need for God. And so in that moment of weakness, as Christ was crucified on a cross, we see the greatest display of God's power. And in that moment of foolishness, as Christ was crucified on a cross, we see the greatest display of God's wisdom.

Because the message of the cross subverts human power and human wisdom. It contradicts what we regard as power and wisdom. And the cross shows us real and true power and wisdom. It shows us that even at their very best, the wisdom and the power of this world don't come close to God's wisdom and power.

[13:07] And that's why Paul concludes the section by saying, for the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength. And so the message of Christ crucified, which this world writes off as foolishness, is wiser than man's wisdom. And the message of the cross of Christ crucified, which this world writes off as weakness, is stronger than man's strength. And so what people can be so blind to, the cross of Christ, is actually the greatest sign of God's power and God's wisdom. So what people can be so ignorant of, the cross of Christ, is the clearest display of God's power and God's wisdom. It is how God accomplishes his saving work on our behalf. And so the message of the cross is stronger than anything human power can accomplish and wiser than anything human wisdom can conceive of. Why? Because it saves people like you and like me from sin and death and hell. And nothing else can. Nothing apart from the cross.

And so can you see how the tables are turned by the cross? Because the human wisdom that dismisses the cross as foolish, when you ask people on the street what do they think about the cross, the human wisdom that dismisses it as foolish is itself totally foolish because it rejects the only way of salvation. And the human power that dismisses the cross as weak is itself completely weak because it can't save anyone from anything. Sin, death, hell. And so the cross can be viewed in two ways.

Yes, it can be seen as foolish and weak. It's what Paul says. It can look ridiculous. Or it can be seen as the power and wisdom of God. And so as we close, can I ask you, how do you see the cross? Sadly, some people will never understand the cross. The death of Jesus will always seem completely foolish to them. Paul says the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing.

But he says to us who are being saved, it is the power of God. So on the cross, Jesus willingly suffered and died to take the punishment for our sins so we can be saved. And so Good Friday is good news for everybody because God in his love welcomes all who repent, who turn from their sin, and who believe in Jesus. And only when we've done this will the cross make any sense to us. And so the cross is neither foolish nor weak. The cross is wise and strong. Jews demand signs. Greeks look for wisdom. What does the average person look for today? Peace? Satisfaction? Freedom? Purpose? Identity? Meaning? What are you looking for?

[16:47] Only at the cross will your greatest needs and deepest longings in life be met. So it's not just a question of how do you see the cross. Good Friday challenges us all to respond to the cross.

And so if you haven't yet, you should believe in order to be saved. Saying a simple prayer is all it takes. God will hear and God will save.

Praise God for the power of the cross.