

Palm Sunday 1 Corinthians 1.18-2.8

The Foolishness of the Cross

Unless you happen to share President Putin's point of view, it is a remarkable thing that Zelensky, that one of the most courageous and consistently honourable national leaders of our time is a former comedian.

It is often true that comedians often make the best political commentators – but actually to have one in the seat of government is a surprising thing – and potentially a very creative one at that.

In Shakespeare's plays it is very often the fool, the jester of the court, who with his foolishness exposes the absolute stupidity of the rulers and of the systems of the day. It is the role of the clown not only to look foolish, but to expose the foolishness of others.

So when we come to St Paul's comparison of the so called wisdom of the world with the foolishness of the cross of Christ, and all that is to be learned from this, we are digging into a rich seam, from which the gold of wisdom, true wisdom, may be mined.

We don't have to look far in today's world – or even in our own lives, if we are honest, to see foolishness. Madness even. Our own madness. The choices we make. Our vanity. Our self-centredness. A society in which it's seen as ok if children are spending more time on social media each day than in class. 19% of children spending more than six hours on their phones each day. It's a mad, mad world.

The changes and chances of presidential policy in the United States, decided on the hoof and delivered by social media. The shelving of virtue and common good sense – such that action on climate change gets pushed aside to make space for more missiles, while aid for the poorest and most vulnerable gets replaced by trade tariffs against them. Protestations about the need for making peace – leading within weeks to pronouncements which put an end to the partnerships and alliances, a crude nationalism and isolationism that are a threat to our fundamental human obligation to seek the common good of all. In the famous lines of WB Yeats at the end of the 1st world war:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere

The ceremony of innocence is drowned;

The best lack all conviction, while the worst

Are full of passionate intensity.

In the words of St John, *this* is the world into which 'God sent his only begotten Son', why, because he 'loved the world' so much. Why again? Lest all perish, and lose out on life. The life Jesus describes as 'Life in all its fullness' life as it is intended by God to be. Life eternal.

For St Paul, writing to the Corinthians, it is difficult to present the end of Jesus' life, his death on the cross, as a reasonable, rational way for God to save the world. Formulaic approaches to the

doctrine of atonement don't cut it. Neither in local Jewish culture nor in the Hellenistic Greek culture of the empire does it make sense. On the face of it, what we celebrate as victory, looks like devastating defeat.

And yet that is what he does. This does make sense. It is the love of Christ revealed through Jesus death on the cross, which 'compels us'. (We shall look at the strength, the power of the cross tomorrow, and explore the Love of the Cross further on Tuesday, before turning on Wednesday to consider the place of the cross in our everyday lives. Do join us here!)

But for this evening let us simply pause with this – the *foolishness of the cross* revealing the *deep wisdom of God*. Wisdom and sense coming to us from an unexpected place, taking us by surprise.

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.

Jews demand signs, and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles. As a Jew, Paul speaks of himself and of his own people. As a Hellenist, a Greek speaker who knows how Greeks think, Paul speaks of himself and of the Empire of Rome, of which he is a citizen. We trip up on the cross. In so many ways it defies explanation.

'God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world's eyes to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are.....'

At the very least, the cross of Christ makes us think again. It pulls us up short, stops us in our tracks, and calls all our assumptions into question.

As a young youth leader I was called onto the rounders pitch one bright summer evening at a church camp at Ballater, Scotland. I took the rounders bat and scanned the horizon. I would show them how it should be done. I would hit the ball into the distance for at least one rounder – yes I'd show them what I was made of.

The bowler bowled, I took a swipe, but the bat – which had got wet in the rain slipped from my hand onto John's nose, just three yards away. Blood everywhere.

John was about 14, big for his age. And for the leaders difficult to manage. A bit of a clown in fact. But what had happened? He was knocked out and bleeding. He was rushed to the local medical centre. I remained behind. Wondering if he would live.

What had I done?

I was so ashamed. Of my casual, careless behaviour. Of my pride in myself wanting to impress everyone. I had really messed up. And John had paid the price. It was devastating. Nobody could make this right. Yes I cried, not that tears could make anything better. Would he survive? What on earth had I done?

After a while the car appeared back from the medical centre on its way as it turned out, to the hospital in Aberdeen, where his nose would be set. But John had insisted on coming back to the campsite to see me on the way. I don't remember exactly what he said from the car window – but it was something like – *it's all right – I forgive you*.

I had to think again. Here was grace. Here was something better than might. Something better than success. Something better than winning the match or winning approval. Here was humankindness.

The love of Christ crucified compels us to think again. Foolishness is exposed. He takes the knocks. He steps in to carry the weight of human madness, of human suffering, and of my shame.

So Jesus, laying down his life for us, comes to us in this Holy Week, revealing true wisdom, true strength, real forgiveness, and hope, hope for each one of us. Hope for the world.

What do we do? We let God do in us what only God can do. We let God forgive, mend, and remake us. And we worship, recognising not the folly of the cross but its deeper wisdom, the love that will not let me go – all we do, is be ready, as Jesus arms are open for us on the cross, is to say, in our hearts, thank you. And *Yes!*

This is a heavy time, this week, but joy will come so soon, on the other side, on Easter morning, when we shall know that because he lives, we can be free. There is a new beginning.

But for now let us determine like Paul, to know nothing except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.

WE ADORE YOU O CHRIST AND WE BLESS YOU, BY YOUR HOLY CROSS YOU HAVE REDEEMED THE WORLD.

Amen.