

I Cor 1: Foolishness of the Cross

Every time you think you can start to make sense of Christianity, then you must not, under any circumstances, read any of the letters by Saint Paul. Because he ruins everything. I sometimes wonder whether the reason that God allowed Paul's writings into the New Testament, is just to keep everyone humble.

Traditionally, protestants in general have spent more time reading Saint Paul than they have reading the Gospels. That was certainly the view of Paul Fiddes, on the back of his experience as a theologian at Oxford. That most Baptists, at least, are more familiar with the words of Saint Paul than with the words of Jesus. Perhaps because all we have in the Gospels are stories: whereas Paul, well he seems to be giving us facts, doctrines, things we can turn into rules and regulations and documents without too much hard work.

And it makes it rather difficult then, to make sense of a passage like today's reading from Corinthians. Some of you are clearly a step ahead of me in seeing the danger that we might unwittingly engage in an excessive degree of teleological retrojection, and I couldn't agree more. That is, all too easily, we will read our own contexts into that of Paul, and come up with a meaning for the passage that is almost the precise opposite of what Paul intended to say.

So, for instance, the passage from Corinthians is often heard this way: People who use their brains, are anti-Christian. Philosophy and the study of the Scripture is pointless intellectualism. Who needs to read and study and learn? Instead, just turn up to church, clap your hands and swing your pants, as you lose yourself in wonder, love and praise. Well, maybe it's a bit of a caricature, because you don't have to belong to a hand-clapping pant-swinging church to treasure this kind of reading of Scripture.

Naturally, I am a little biased, given that I am one of those people who has committed years to studying the so-called philosophy of our age. Which, by some people's logic, already excludes me from being able to understand this passage. But let's think a little bit about what Paul means by the philosophy of the age. It is perhaps, best understood, by looking at that which is set up in tension over against the philosophy of the age, namely – the message of the cross.

I follow Paul, I follow Peter, I follow Apolos, I follow Christ! It sounds almost as though the church at Corinth is trying to define what kind of minister it wants! And there is some division over the issue, and it has spilled over into good old fashioned ecclesiastical power games. And it is precisely these power games that are bugging Paul.

When set against the message of the cross, the whole notion of power games looks silly. There are clearly strengths that Peter and Paul and Apolos have, which contrast with one another. And it seems to be that these are the characters to whom Paul himself refers when he is talking Jewish signs and Greek wisdom and the philosophy of the age. Whatever cultural clothing Christianity may be found inside, what counts is the message of the cross.

And how easily people get pre-occupied with the particular means by which the message of the cross is couched in cultural terms. These are big questions at a time when Islamophobia is acceptable, and when an NUS president is shouted down simply for being Jewish. Interviewed this morning, a young man who has been trained to work for reconciliation

between Jewish and Moslem believers on University campuses was asked, really, whether – given the sheer prejudice and antagonism, he was really just wasting his time. And his response was absolutely right. It is human nature to squabble and entrench yourself against those with whom you profoundly disagree.

Now, at Corinth, there was massive cultural and religious diversity – just like in London. And within the Christian community here at London, look at what we have: Hillsong to the north, with a focus on positive news of Christ the King in an up-beat, lively fashion – that appeals to a particular type of person. Then you have St Giles, renowned for its use of liturgies ancient and unpronounceable, but with a beauty and eloquence that articulates something deep inside the human spirit – appealing again, to a particular type of person – probably not the same type who would be attending Hillsong. Within a hundred yards, two opposite ends of the spectrum – and I have no idea at all where Bloomsbury fits into this picture.

The point being, that Central London, like Corinth, is a place where competing cultural styles can all-too-easily overcome the message of the cross itself. So, the naughty part of me, wonders which of the things we hold dear about worship are simply things in our culture that make us feel comfortable and secure – and which of the things in worship are genuinely part of the message of the cross. Of course, you can't really separate things out like this in a clean and tidy way...

But what is the message of the cross? And in what ways might it even challenge our precious beliefs about God himself and the church and how it runs?

In the first instance, the message of the cross says that God loves us. Yes, we know that already... But really, that God loves me and you. What does it really mean, that the Son of God willingly suffered and died this kind of death to express the love of God for us? That God himself, goes out of his own way, for you? That the agent of creation physically had nails driven into his wrists? And for us?

Was this just some ancient transaction between Jesus and his bloodthirsty father in order to secure us a ticket to heaven and a place on the church members' list while we wait? Or was this something that involves us personally, today. The message of the cross is one of gratuitous violence, and gratuitous love. That no matter what shame or disgrace we might have known, whatever mistakes or crimes we may have committed, regardless of how we feel about who we really are – knowing, and despite, and because of all this – this God stoops to us, and forgives us, and loves us. To experience death on our behalf, death that awaits us all, and the death that imposes itself upon our experience even in the midst of life. What kind of message is that to us? Foolish? Embarrassing? Irrelevant?

When we ask the question, why did Jesus die... if I ask students, half of the answers you get are the “because God loves us” ones, and half are the “because the Jews and the Romans were upset with him” ones.

Politically: The most potent human being who ever had existed, comes into conflict with the most sophisticated religious system of the day, and the most sophisticated legal system ever known – and still ends up condemned. And what does it mean, that the most potent human being who had ever existed, comes into conflict with the ultimate power of the world – and fails? What does it mean, when the one in whom we invest so much hope, is humiliated and

defeated in the most shameful way imaginable? You can see how, if we like church because of the music or the clothes or the liturgies or the friendships, the message of the cross is utter foolishness.

Part of the foolishness of the cross, politically, is concerned with the person whose place he took! He took the place of Barabas – the one who had given his life to bring justice by force. The one who had begun an uprising against Rome. And when the people called for Barabas to be released, they were calling for the kind of Messiah that would give himself to make an actual, practical difference to the world and its injustices. Not someone who, like this Jesus, would be criticising the very people who were working for justice. Jesus was crucified, because his means to bringing justice to the world, was utterly foolish.

And ultimately, it was foolish because, in the end – it failed. When Jesus died, the powers were still in place. The Temple still stood. The Romans still ruled. The messiah had failed – not only failed, but had been publicly humiliated.

I wonder, in what sense, the message of the cross that we bear, is rational and sensible and makes us nod with approval?

And in what sense, are our actions as individuals and as a community, utterly foolish?

People associated with this church travel around the world for different reasons: but how about this. Going into a dangerous, violent place as a peaceful protester or UN observer... would we say that is sensible?

One of our church officers, when he should have had his feet up with a Sunday paper and a cigar, was down on his knees in the foyer, cleaning up after someone who had drunk too much had kindly emptied his bowels onto the carpet. The foolishness of the cross is preached there.

People who have quietly given money, or time, or opened their homes – not to nice, respectable people like us, but to people who are disturbing, or awkward, or unappreciative. The foolishness of the cross is preached there.

Or one of our friends who pours everything he has into supporting a wife and a child who seem to want nothing to do with him. Doing it out of love for them and love for God. The foolishness of the cross is preached right there.

I wonder if its worth just stopping, and thinking about what we do... what we do to preach the foolishness of the cross. And in the quiet, to think of something that we can do today, to preach the folly of the cross. Something small, that would make a big difference to someone else... Something big, that no one else will see or know about directly ... Something that takes a little effort... something that takes a lot of courage...

Lord, by your grace today, let each one of us preach the foolishness of the cross, to the glory of your name.

Amen.