

Hymns: 21 “Born in song!”
 247 “I danced in the morning”
 273 “Here hangs a man discarded”
 313 “Thine be the glory”

Readings: 1 Corinthians 1:18-31
 John 2: 13-22

FOOLISH WISDOM

Here we are on the third Sunday in the period of Lent. Two Sundays ago we looked at the wilderness – Jesus’ time in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry and our own wilderness experiences – spiritually and in the ups and downs of our daily life.

Last week Leslie looked at how Jesus tried to be honest with his disciples, to warn them quite openly that he had to go to Jerusalem and face opposition, arrest and death. The disciples did not want to accept what Jesus was saying. Peter, in particular, rebuked Jesus and got a flea in his ear for his pains. Jesus knew what lay ahead of him and wanted to face it head on – no denial, no burying his head in the sand. Jesus knew what he faced and knew also that it was not what the disciples expected of the Messiah, the Son of God.

This theme is picked up this week in our reading from the Apostle Paul’s Letter to the Corinthians. Paul has to try to convince Jews and Gentiles that the life and ministry of Jesus, despite ending in apparent failure on a cross, was, in fact, the greatest victory that could possibly be – the triumph of love through death on that cross, the triumph of light over darkness and of life over death.

As we look forward to Good Friday and Easter Sunday we need to engage again with the fact that Jesus was executed on a cross. The Son of God died an excruciating death as a common criminal. Indeed God himself died for us. This is such a challenging idea for us to grasp that ordinary language fails us. As ordinary prose failed me at this point I looked for poetry and turned to the hymn of Fred Pratt Green – ‘Jesus in the olive grove’ and to the last two verses in particular.

It is God himself who dies!
God in man shall set us free
God as man – and only he.

Let him claim us as his own
We will serve him as best we can
Such a God and such a man!

Paul in his letter to the Corinthians struggled to get his message across. He knew that Jews had awaited a Messiah – a great Redeemer, who would restore the nation to its former glory and power. The Jews turned out to hail such a Messiah when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on what we now call Palm Sunday. But their expectations

were not fulfilled – their hopes were dashed and the events of Good Friday put an end to all their yearnings.

The idea of a Messiah, long looked for and prayed for by the Jews, did not include an ignominious death on a hill of skulls outside the city wall of Jerusalem.

Then there were the Greeks – living all around the Mediterranean world. Many of them were thinkers and philosophers – people looking for ideas that would show them the meaning of life and the route to a happy existence. There were among them many seekers after truth who were attracted by the God of the Jews. But how could a crucified Jesus be held up as an example to live by? The Greeks were intellectuals who wanted a measure of success and fulfilment in their lives. How could Jesus with his pathetic death on a cross appeal to such people?

And whether Jew or Greek the people were looking for meaning, purpose and a good life now – not in an indeterminate future.

So Paul pulls no punches with his Corinthian audience, he tells the Jesus story as it is – ‘the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing.’ By all common-sense, logical, conventional human standards – the story of Jesus and his death on the cross is completely absurd. How can God, by definition omnipotent, show his power in such weakness and ignominy?

And, of course, we know that it was not only 1st century Jews or Greeks who found the story of Jesus and his death foolish. It has been so down the ages and into our own time. Our contemporaries, if they engage with the story of Jesus at all, can’t understand why, if God is God, Jesus, his Son, ended up crucified on a cross.

Certainly other religions find the cross one of the most difficult aspects of the Christian faith. And perhaps that applies to us, too at times. We happily focus on Jesus’ ministry of compassion and healing, we rejoice in the resurrection of Jesus and of his conquering of death for all. But how often do we talk of the cross?

The message of the cross is not a system of thought or a way of life – it is God’s power at work to save those who cannot save themselves – no matter how hard they think or how well they live. That is why we feel uncomfortable about the message of the cross – it punctures all our vaunted ambition, all our confidence in ourselves, all our cherished independence.

We find it difficult impossible at times to acknowledge that however hard we try we cannot be the architects of our own salvation. Many, many Christians, well-intentioned, sincere Christians have had to learn that lesson.

For years John Wesley sought to work out his own salvation – through a methodical application to Bible-reading, prayer and good works to the needy and through becoming a missionary to the colonies in North America – but none of this gave him the assurance of God’s love and of his salvation. It was only on 24th May 1728 that he felt he trusted in Jesus Christ and was given an assurance that his sins, even his, had been forgiven and that he had been saved from the law of sin and death.

Back to St. Paul and his letter to the Corinthians for a moment. Paul knew that his message of the cross was hard for people to accept so, especially for the benefit of his Jewish readers, he quotes the Old Testament scriptures showing that over and over again God has destroyed the wisdom of the wise who thought that they knew how to save Israel. We can think of those people who thought that they could reach God and be like God by building a tower – the tower of Babel. Does this not show us how ridiculous we human beings can be at times in our bloated ambition and intellectual arrogance?

Lest I be misunderstood I am not saying that human beings should not use their God-given powers of reason and intelligence and seek to understand more deeply the workings of the world in which we live. But the God who created all that is and is far beyond the powers of human understanding cannot be known 'from below' – from our efforts alone.

As the Apostle Paul says in this passage, "for God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom and God's weakness is stronger than human strength." In other words, 'get things in perspective, you humans, you are the creatures dealing with the creator.'

Paul then goes on to say "consider your own call, brothers and sisters – not many of you were wise by human standards, not many powerful Yet God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is lowly and despised in the world. That's us, isn't it? God chose to reach out to us – he is the source of our life and yet, by the standards of the world most of us could not have expected that to happen to us.

If one looks through the history of Christianity and the history of the Church, time and again one sees God at work through lowly people – people who could never have imagined that in God's strength they would achieve great things for the kingdom.

Let me give you one example. I have been looking at the history of the Bible Christians in Devon and Cornwall because this is the 200th anniversary of the year that they broke away from Wesleyan Methodism. Most Bible Christians, particularly the early generations were humble, uneducated people – miners, farm labourers and domestic servants – yet they were filled with fervour to preach the Gospel. One of them in the mid-19th century went as a missionary to a tribal people in China. His name was Sam Pollard and he was from Camelford, a small Cornish town on the edge of Bodmin Moor. Not only did he bring the Gospel message to these people but he also devised a script so that their language could be written down and the Scriptures translated for them. The script he devised is still in use today and he is held up as a hero among these Miao people up to this day.

This is just one of many examples I could have chosen of those who were not wise by the standards of this world yet did great things for God.

The cross was seemingly foolish to those who did not understand the lengths to which God's love was prepared to go to love us into the kingdom. But just as Jesus told it straight to his disciples and made them aware that they, too, would be called to suffer if they were truly to follow him so for us, the message is clear – following Jesus will not be an easy ride.

Perhaps more than in earlier centuries we who call ourselves Christians in this century will have to be prepared to be ridiculed, to be castigated as spreading toxic ideas to children and to be judged as people who have abandoned all reason.

As Jesus had to suffer on his cross so we may be called upon to suffer our crosses too – loss of friends, loss of reputation even loss of our job. Being a follower of Jesus has never been a guarantee of an easy life – quite the opposite. Yet foolish as many might think it is we know that following Jesus opens up for us the possibility of abundant life now and of sharing in his glory in eternity.

I end with two verses of a hymn that encapsulate the message of this sermon.

The kingdom of God
Is challenge and choice
Believe the good news
Repent and rejoice!
His love for us sinners
Brought Christ to his cross
Our crisis of judgement
For gain or for loss.

God's kingdom is come
The gift and the goal,
In Jesus begun,
In heaven made whole;
The heirs of the kingdom
Shall answer his call,
And all things cry glory
To God all in all. Amen