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Luke 19:29-38

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Luke 23:1-49

Sermon by Martin Wright

Today is April Fool's Day, and we are gathered here to worship the greatest fool of them all. A man who went willingly to an excruciating death he could easily have avoided, and who, doing so, squandered unprecedented political capital.

We heard today, out in the garden, how Jesus entered Jerusalem to great acclaim—he was treated as a king. If only he had played his cards right! Think of the potential there was for him to do good. This man, with his unheard-of charisma, who had merely to say “Follow me”, and people left everything and followed him—not to mention his power to work miracles—could easily have had all Israel, Judah, Palestine, the whole Middle-East behind him. He could have established a reign of justice and peace. And the tremendous army that would have flocked to follow him could have been a check even to the mighty Roman Empire, could have been a peacekeeping force for the whole world. How different our history might have been! And yet he rejected every temptation to power, and chose instead to die a spectacular but obscure failure.

The world can only make sense of the passion and death of Jesus Christ by considering it foolishness on a monumental scale. That was the judgement of those who stood by the cross and mocked him. It is also the judgement of those many well-meaning people throughout history, who have looked back on Jesus as a sort of a pathetic hero: a man who very laudably thought that his values were more important for his life, and who died rather than betray what he believed in. A noble example—a heroic gesture—but ultimately futile.

This Holy Week, and especially today, as we contemplate the different sorts of foolishness of which Our Lord was guilty, we can't help but be reminded of Paul's words to the Corinthians, that “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise”, and that “God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom”.

Every year on this Sunday, one week before Easter, we read the passion story from one of the three Synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark or, as we did today, Luke. (We hear from John on Friday.) Each of the gospel accounts is different, each has a different portrait of Jesus and of what is going on. And although they contradict each other in many details, the question isn't “Which is right and which is wrong?”, but “What insights do these different ways of telling the story give us into the meaning of the crucifixion?”.

Matthew and Mark's passion story shows Jesus in a bitter struggle. He is terrified of the fate that awaits him, and in the garden of Gethsemane, desperately wrestles with God, trying to escape from it if he can. And in the end it is every bit as bad as he dreaded and worse, and he dies with the cry of dereliction on his lips, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”. Matthew and Mark's Jesus is the one who shares

the cruellest extremes of human suffering, even to the point of feeling abandoned by God. This is the Jesus who descends into the very depths of hell.

John's account is very different. For him, the cross is the crowning moment of Jesus' life, his triumph, when he is enthroned as King, and exalted above the earth to draw all peoples to himself. In his last breath, his life's work is accomplished.

Luke's Jesus has neither the bitter pathos of Matthew and Mark's, nor quite the majestic splendour of John's. Luke's Jesus goes to his death calmly, at peace with those around him (it's only in Luke, for instance, that he heals the ear of the slave injured by Peter), freely choosing to die in this way, and in great confidence, never doubting that his vindication is at hand.

For Luke, the cross is the great climactic moment of history, when God's forgiveness is made freely available to all people. Even as Jesus is being hauled up, he says "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing"—only in Luke. And to the repentant criminal at his side, he says "Today you will be with me in Paradise"—only in Luke. And he dies, not with a cry of dereliction, but boldly commending his spirit into his Father's hands—only in Luke.

This Jesus is not just the victim of some unholy farce. He is the protagonist, calmly and deliberately choosing his path, in control of events. This foolishness of his seems to have a strange internal logic; he seems to be rather confident about it. In fact, of course, he is living out a different sort of wisdom—God's wisdom—a wisdom which the world can only regard as foolishness, and banish from its midst, to die outside the city walls.

In this he is very like the suffering servant of Isaiah. This servant has been entrusted with a word from God, a word which will be so offensive to the people that it can only be preached at great cost to himself. Nevertheless he gives his chin to those who would pluck out his beard, his back to those who would beat him with rods; he stands in the court of judgement, in the presence of those who will condemn him unjustly, and is not ashamed. He knows that God who vindicates him, who will set him to rights, is close at hand.

When Jesus stood before his accusers, before Pilate, Herod and the crowds, God's wisdom was put on trial by the world. Of course it was a show trial, a travesty of justice in which Jesus' fate was predetermined by political expediency. Thank God nothing like that ever happens in our modern, enlightened Western democracies.

Nevertheless it is easy to underestimate Pilate, a man who is often written off as weak and vacillating. In Luke's account, at least, he comes across as a canny politician, well attuned to the sensitivities of his situation. He doesn't want to offend Herod, who has some claim to jurisdiction; he doesn't want to offend the religious leaders, who are such a powerful part of his constituency. He would prefer to make a non-judgement and offend nobody. And when, finally, he gives way somewhat unwillingly and allows Jesus to be executed, he is only doing the sensible thing—listening to the voice of the people. He hears the majority and accedes to their will. Anybody who wants to get anything done knows that you sometimes have to go along with the majority, even if they're wrong. Pilate's was a very wise course of action.

Similarly with the religious leaders, who are often portrayed as just bloodthirsty. They were quite right too—Jesus' death, although unfortunate, made good political sense. After all, this man was stirring up a lot of unrest among the Israelite people. If it went much further, Rome might send in her mighty army to crush them, and all

their cherished religious liberty would be lost. Surely it would be better for one man to die for the sake of the whole people? From the point of view of the religious leaders, just as from Pilate's point of view, Jesus' death might be regrettable, but it was politically expedient, the wise thing to do.

So the cross is the world's judgement on God's wisdom. And it is inevitably a judgement of death. A presence which was unbearably confronting had to be removed from our midst, hung up outside the city walls and left to die there. But the cross is, much more profoundly, God's judgement on the world's wisdom. And, amazingly, it is a judgement of forgiveness.

When the world sat in judgement on God, our verdict was, "Crucify him". But when God sat in judgement on the world, his verdict was, "Father, forgive them—these wise men do not know what they are doing".