

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Psalm 15

Matthew 5:1-12

Foolishness, wisdom, politics, God

In a sentence:

God's ways in the world call our ways and confidence into question, seeking from us humble action towards justice.

With his claims for a foolishness which is wisdom and weakness which is strength, Paul seems to be going all paradoxical and mystical, rendering these notions self-contradictory nonsense, with little offered to replace them.

At stake here, however, is not mystification but the question of the freedom of God. The Corinthian church was divided and confused, as most communities are! Paul's concern is that God is taken to justify that confusion. The division arises from the exercise of a particular sense for wisdom and power – that which traces its source and legitimacy back to God. The way of the world – the order of the Corinthian Christian community – is justified by direct lines to God. Turned around the other way, the argument becomes not merely that our ordering of the world is like God but that God is like our ordering of the world.

Paul's inversion of wisdom and power, then, is not about mystifying these notions but about God's freedom: you can't read God off the order of the world. God is not constrained by the way that we do things.

...God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world 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, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

The 'boasting' here is not about how handsome, smart or otherwise godly I might be, but a celebration of the gift of God. Boasting about myself is precisely a claim to godlikeness, and it is this which is the source of human division – the appeal to a righteousness outside of the present relationships in which I find myself, which sets me free from responsibility for you. It is this lack of responsibility for the other which divides the Corinthians, and us today.

Paul's 'boasting in the Lord' sounds to modern ears like an unnecessary otherworldliness, but it stands as a challenge to all the concrete worldliness-es – the wisdoms and powers – we usually exercise. In particular, it stands against all claims that there is a system which will work things out for us, a set of necessary steps we need to take to set human being right. If there were such a system, we'd have to admit that we have yet to discover it after thousands of years of effort.

The current debates around the Parliamentary Voice are a case in point. Increasing recognition of our complicated and violent colonial history, continuing need in aboriginal communities and general goodwill on the part of the majority of Australians are not enough to show us a way forward. The reasonable desire for a clearer

communication of what is intended, mixed with cynical political tactics from some opposition parties, mixed with division within the indigenous community, mixed with the possibility of compassion fatigue, risk aversion and self-interest in the voting populace, all amount to anything but clarity as to what is to be done to undo some of the injustice of the past and the present. The same could be said for the numerous other challenges in the social, political and economic spheres whirling around us. These spaces are filled with social and political slogans which are both right and wrong at the same time. They are right in that they name an injustice, and wrong in that they imagine that those injustices can properly be made just. The justification of *this* claim – that the injustice cannot be rectified – is the experience of history itself: we have not seen it happen in any final way. This recognition is not new. It is not for nothing that old Israel opted for apocalyptic thinking. This embodied the notion that if there is going to be any experience of final justice, it must come from *outside* the dynamics of normal history. Apocalyptic thinking is not an escape from life in the world but a recognition of the world's unresolved problem: when will injustice be overcome?

The question then becomes, how are we to live under such circumstances? And this is a question of how to live *together*, because dropping out of circulation is easy, denying as it does that the other is part of me and I part of her.

Paul's answer to the question of justice seems weak, given the scale of what confronts us in contemporary social and political division. This answer is crystallised later in his first letter to the Corinthians, in his famous 'love chapter' (chapter 13). The apparent weakness of this response springs not least from the context in which we normally hear Paul's appeal to love: in weddings. There, Paul's thoughts on love are heard as an account of what the marrying couple themselves *already* experience. In modern marriages (weddings), we commit because of our experience of love. This is the *presence* of a kind of justice, so that there is no call for what Paul is actually doing in that chapter – *commanding* an unloving couple to love each other. Such a command might make sense in an arranged marriage but not in our modern marriages, at least not to the beginning! Paul's love chapter, then, is reduced to what we feel about people we already love, which has little to do with those from whom we are alienated, which was his own situation.

And so, love becomes a weak political proposal. What does *love* look like now, in relation to Australia's colonial history? This is precisely the question. But if, with Paul, there is to be no boasting save in the Lord, then there can be no all-encompassing answer – no proposal that love *only* looks like the Parliamentary Voice, or a treaty, or one of the less novel approaches to the problems of indigenous experience in Australia. Any one of these is as full of possibility and risk as the other because, for all the good which might still be done, the injustices we want to address here can only ever be partially addressed. And they can only be partially addressed because, at heart, human beings are fanatics for this or that wisdom or power which ultimately excludes and denies. The tone of modern politics is nothing if not fanatical.

This is not intended to be pessimistic but realistic. To commit to some political action (such as the Voice or a treaty) is not to have solved the problem. There is no righteous deed which does not need constant re-negotiation. Justice is a continual balancing act or perhaps, in our direct experience, an *inbalancing* act.

Paul's 'boasting in the Lord' is not, then, the confidence that with God everything is clear and in good order, much less that the present order is God-ordained. This was the claim of the happier Corinthians, who were confident they had settled into God's way. To 'boast in the Lord' is to *delay* claims about the achievement of righteousness while at the same time acting towards justice. It is to hear a call to justice and to turn towards

that voice within the messy now of human life together, where it will always be the case that we can do better. It is to debate and to work for justice, but also to be 'above' arguments about any final solution. It is to be broken and whole in the same moment, in a way which denies neither the need for our action nor the unearned gift of God.

Faith in the God of the crucified Jesus is recognition that we are not, in history, ever finished – not ever righteous. The closest we come to completion is in the person of Jesus, who is himself defined by the ambiguity of the cross – that confusion of human and divine judgement which, Paul declares, turns our sense for power and wisdom upside down, and should shake our confidence that we see clearly.

Paul's attempt to dislocate our confidence – that we see and comprehend truly – is an invitation to humility. In society and politics, humility is much lauded but rare. What looks successful and gains attention is the exercise of wisdoms and powers which lift you above me. What distinguishes humility from this is that it is not *deluded*: it claims no extraordinary and unambiguous power or value but acts according to justice, and looks to see what the next just action might have to be.

This is the life of faith to which Paul calls the Corinthians, and us: to do justice, love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God (Micah 6.8). In the broadest of our politics and the most intimate of our relationships, let this be how we are there for each other: with a wisdom which is ever more open to deeper love, and a strength which comes from God's own persistent faithfulness.

By the grace of God...
