

Epiphany 4
30/01/2011

Mark the Evangelist

Micah 6:1-8

Psalms 15

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Matthew 5:1-12

Living by the foolishness of God

When Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, he sought to address a problem. Divisions had sprung up in the congregation he founded. Where once they had been united in purpose, based on the Gospel received through Paul's preaching of Christ, now the congregation had become polarised according to personal allegiances. A range of competitive viewpoints had developed. Understandings of human excellence had been allowed to usurp the priority of the Gospel. Competitive cliques had formed around leaders whom we would judge to be caught up in their own grandiosity. Schism was a strong possibility.

Once he had got through his polite greeting and stated what he knew about the context of his audience, Paul went straight to the root of the problem. He restated the message of the cross as the proper basis for congregational life. It is a strong word that turns our way of looking at faith and life on its head.

Paul identified two prevailing approaches to achieving knowledge of God: "Jews seek signs and Greeks demand wisdom". Jews challenged anyone claiming to have knowledge of God to give a sign as proof. It represented a refusal to take God on trust, and it had the effect of placing the power of God under human control.

Greeks loved wisdom and before they would countenance it, they expected any statement about God to be couched in terms of lofty philosophy. Once again, this is about calling on God to speak to us in our terms. This happens today, for example when philosophers want God to be "reasonable" or seek to discredit the resurrection on "intellectual grounds". It means God is dealt out of the game and it crucifies Christ again.

When Paul called his audience to centre on the cross of Christ, he advocated an image for understanding God that failed all current tests. No one in the ancient world would have chosen the Cross as a symbol for the revelation of God. It was a stumbling block for Jews who could not imagine God as present to us in the humiliating death of one judged to be a criminal. And for Greeks, whose imagination was guided by thoughts of perfection of and of gods who were above time, the cross of Christ appeared to be perfect folly. The Cross of Christ as the sign of God's presence went against the stream, and it still does. It makes shipwreck of all human pretensions of knowledge of God. And it still has the power to prick the bubble of inflated egos and break down power struggles.

What makes the message of the cross so powerful? There are two sides to the story. The first is that in the cross we see the fate of a man who chose to live his life in total vulnerability towards God. In the struggle between living for God or for himself, he always went towards God, no matter the cost. That is what it means when it says: "he died to sin". Not once did he put out his hand to grasp at equality with God. He always chose to trust God with his life. This brought him to Calvary. That is why the message of the cross is that the blood of Jesus saves us. Not because of old ideas of sacrifice, but because Jesus' poured out blood is the sign of the consequence of his life of always choosing God. Paradoxically, his complete powerlessness in human terms becomes the source of his real strength, because in him God exposed the power of life for all to see. In the light of the cross we have to revise all our ideas of what is really strong, in this powerful world. The theology that grows from this point will not suit those who want power.

The other side of the story is the Resurrection, the proclamation that God took Jesus [raised him] to forever indwell the Spirit of Life. God does not slay things. The Resurrection is God showing us that the spirit Jesus, who was slain by us, has had been joined to God's spirit. The Resurrection is God's revelation to us that Jesus shares fully in God's eternal, unconquerable nature. Stanley Hauerwas says the meaning of the Christian faith is that: "the Creator of the world showed up in the cross and resurrection of Jesus." In Paul's terms, those who are truly wise are those who believe: who trust this to be true and live by its wisdom.

Paul's concept of Godly wisdom and strength as opposite to that of the world continues the Wisdom tradition of scripture and also disrupts it. Paul did care about intellectual life. He did want things done decently and in order, but he wanted it to start in the proper place: with the knowledge of God who does not think as mortals think and is free to choose where glory will be manifested. Paul's association of wisdom and strength with the humiliation of the cross defines and focuses the work of God for us in a way that we cannot by pass. The cross is God helping us through a means which is repulsive to our eyes and offensive to our minds. But here we have been given knowledge of God and offered a new possibility of life in a way we would never have guessed at. This might not be what we prefer, but it is what God has chosen to give us, making our access to God possible. And because it happened on the margins it challenges us to continue to pay attention to those whom we marginalise: women, gays, indigenous people, the poor, for among them glory may again be being manifest for us today.

Paul says this message is made clear in the foolishness of preaching. By that he means more than what is happening at this moment. It means the whole action of showing forth the gospel of God. The words, deeds and worship of the church, which even now seem to be foolish to those who have contact with them. The task of continuing to make clear that what God is is not what mortals think is a burden for the church. This is not grandiose knowledge. It wins us no points in the world. It leaves us wondering about the worth and the truth of what we believe. Compared with the usual paradigms of human reasoning and functioning what the church says and does is foolishness: it appears to be useless and irrelevant and attempts are always being made to evacuate from our language and culture any reference to God.

Meanwhile, for the church, living by the cross turns out to be a cross: a source of indignity. Amongst its contemporaries, the church and its people look like a bunch of fools. But like the cross of Christ itself, fools are paradoxical figures the purpose of whose life is to make something visible that would otherwise stay hidden: in this case God who claims the world for divine purposes and speaks to us through humiliation, suffering and death. By this extraordinary means God seeks to liberate us from the human systems of living and being that bind us down and keep us from all that is good.

The purpose of living by the folly of the cross of Christ is that through the witness of the church others may find the God who has found us. The church that keeps this knowledge at the centre will seem weak but it will be strong. It will seem foolish but in fact be wise. For the invitation to live by this wisdom, which seems so irrelevant and undercutting in the world today, is an invitation to new life in which we know God, and you can't have more than that.
