

**Epiphany 5**  
**6/02/2011**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Isaiah 58:1-9a**

**Psalms 112**

**1 Corinthians 2:1 -12**

**Matthew 5:13 - 20**

### **Living with competing wisdoms**

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The Apostle Paul has been a contentious figure in the history of the Christianity. In the nineteenth century there were many questions about his place in the evolution of the faith. Should he be regarded as the “second founder” of the faith? Did his version of the Christianity fit with the Gospels? Was it because of his ministry that Greek philosophical concepts replaced the teachings of Jesus? In his own day Paul lived in a world where physical attributes were prized. Paul was not well gifted in this area. A description from the second century tells us:

*Paul [was] a man small in size, bald-headed, bandy legged, of noble mien, [manner] with eyebrows meeting, rather hook-nosed, full of grace” [Meeks, p 212]*

And according to certain standards of the time, his oratorical capacity seemed to be in short supply. This became an issue in the church at Corinth. After he left Christian missionaries arrived who were caught up in Gnosticism, a form of elitist spiritual knowledge in which the practitioners were reputed to have gone beyond mere faith to a deeper revelation. Their version of religion, which is essentially self-interested rather than self-giving, has many modern equivalents. The Corinthian Gnostics were on a quest for spiritual excellence that ran counter to Paul’s message and methods, arousing feeling against him. They valued eloquence, and privileged physical beauty. According to these standards Paul lacked the marks of a true apostle. He was no celebrity. He did not have a beautiful body. He could work no miracles run a marathon or hit a century. He seemed to be bold only when he wrote letters.

Paul refused to compete with his opposition on their terms. Instead, when he wrote to Corinth he highlighted his weakness in appearance and his lack of clever eloquence in order to emphasise that it was not his strengths but the power of God working through his weaknesses, that gave the Corinthians a new beginning in life.

There is a powerful link between Paul’s weakness according to human standards and his reaffirmation, at depth, of the centrality of the Cross of Christ as the basis for right living in the congregation. According to Paul’s way of looking at the world, the Corinthians could take no credit for their existence as a church. And neither could he. But the new leaders were interpreting his weakness as a sign of God’s absence, which by implication sidelined the cross of Christ. But for Paul the cross and his weakness were signs of God’s presence. In Paul’s’ eyes the Corinthians were called out of darkness into the wonderful light of God, not by the power of his words used plausibly and properly, or his personal attraction. They came to life through a strength gifted to them, as it was given to him. This was a sacramental act wrought by the Spirit of God that was nonetheless channelled through the fumbling grammar and stumbling rhetoric Paul used.

Now the Spirit is the gift of the risen Christ. That means the Spirit of God and Jesus and his cross are not competitors. They are interdependent realities that witness to the self-giving love of God. The Corinthians believed they had achieved “spiritual” knowledge, but their self-centred behaviour belied their claim, proving that they had not moved beyond the realm of the natural spirit.

Paul’s insistence on the centrality of the cross of Christ was a direct challenge to the Corinthian leaders who were infatuated with ideas of eloquence and celebrity as the basis for a superior spiritual life. Compared with their standards Paul, and Christ himself, were losers.

Having worked so hard to downgrade human wisdom and create the picture that it is something all Christians should avoid, Paul says: “*Yet among the mature we **do** speak of wisdom*” [2: v 1]. The word “mature” was apparently a snobbish way the Corinthian “spirituals” had of describing themselves, which indicates Paul chose to enter the field and draw on his opponents’ style of preaching and language. Some commentators feel he has abandoned his earlier stance. But Paul does not collapse his view into that of his opponents. He does set out to say there is a Christian wisdom and that there is a difference between infancy and maturity, as well as between living according to what is natural and what is Spiritual. No matter how much Paul plays with his opponents’ words he does not go beyond or abandon the theology of the cross. He uses his opponents’ views to redefine wisdom in God’s terms, God who from the beginning set out to do something to redeem humanity from choosing to live for itself. This was the truth about the Godly wisdom, from which in their self-centredness the Corinthians had gone astray.

Paul makes an analogy between the human spirit and the Holy Spirit. Just as the human spirit knows us fully, the Holy Spirit knows God fully, which is why he says God’s Spirit imparts a deeper wisdom than any human speculation can achieve. True Wisdom is secret in the sense that it comes from the heart of God who is shrouded in mystery oblivious to the human eye. Yet in the death and rising of Christ we have been shown the place in which God’s love for us is unveiled and made available. The touchstone of this revelation is love rather than gnosis or knowledge. This is deeply ironic. The place where God is revealed is characterised by the sort of hidden-ness, which an “infant” can understand. But it eludes the “mature” Corinthian leaders and the worldly wise such as Herod and Pilate who, locked into thinking solely in human terms untempered by love, justice or ethics, were co-opted by the forces against God to deliver Christ to the cross.

Paul’s discussion of two fundamentally opposite views of wisdom translates into two different ways of approaching the world: one that is self-seeking, one that is not. Paul called the Corinthians to live by Godly wisdom. To allow God’s love for the world, shown in the death and resurrection of Christ, to be the governing spirit of the Church. In simple terms, he wished us to live according to the mind of Christ. This relates to the discussion we have had in the past about the language inside the walls of the church and the language used outside the walls. Inside the church we use and live by the language of godly wisdom. Outside the church will have to use many other languages, yet without giving up the inner commitment to privilege the mind of Christ above all things.

What this means in effect is this. When we sit down to evaluate a Candidate for the ministry, of course we look for someone who has the right gifts: personal awareness, intellectual capability and many other skills. But we are also looking to see if they have the sign of the cross within them, and are not in this seeking power and glory. In relation to church organizations, and we have a big one of our own in the Asylum Seeker Project, we are not in this to achieve a grandiose reputation. We are in this to see that love is delivered as justice to people who need it most, and this is done under the sign of the cross, even if it does not appear on our promotional material. When we live like this, we are keeping the authentic kind of fast Isaiah sought.

Paul himself, as Apostle to the Gentiles, worked across different language barriers, played with different words, and yet without collapsing his understanding of faith, or evacuating all belief in God. His aim was missionary in purpose: to enable others to understand the source of gracious and loving life we know of as God. God who has acted for us to cast off the works of darkness and set in train the movement towards a new future, ruled by love and justice. Paul went beyond his home territory with this news, to enable all people to embrace the riches of this gift, which is light for the world. Being receptive to this offer means being willing to forgo living life on the basis of unmitigated self-interest. And it means being open to see there is an unsurpassable possibility for life to be found in the strangeness of the cross of Christ. A possibility, which is so often repudiated and down graded by the stock standard forms of wisdom fed to us every day, but is seen and embraced by those who are wise to God.

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