



SERMONS THAT WORK

Tuesday in Holy Week

Upside Down

RCL: Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 71:1-14; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; John 12:20-36

In our epistle lesson, Paul deflates claims of believers who puff themselves up.

The First Letter to the Corinthians is addressed to a church experiencing divisions and scandals. A lot of them. Part of the problem seems to be a group of self-styled, super-spiritual people. As Paul puts it, they are “puffed-up.” They flaunt their superior wisdom. They demean others whom they considered socially and spiritually dull: *Très déclassé!*

The super-spiritual much preferred the sophistication and eloquence of Apollos’ sermons to Paul’s inarticulate ramblings. They spoke in tongues and didn’t much care if you were too stupid to understand. You were either in the know -- in the spiritual in crowd -- or not. They thought themselves above silly conventions about food and sex, and if their *outré* behavior scandalized unenlightened blockheads, too bad for them.

In our passage from First Corinthians, Paul lets the air out of the balloon of the super-spiritual. He says, “the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.’ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?” The proclamation of the cross punctures inflated claims to wisdom. Paul explains: “We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.”

Paul sets out a dramatic, counterintuitive contrast. For Gentiles, the idea of a crucified Lord is plain foolishness. How can a god be at once powerful and also executed by Rome? A famous caricature found in ancient Rome depicts a slave falling down before a crucified donkey, under which are the words, “Alexamenos worships his god.” That pretty much sums up the Gentiles’ response to the message of the cross: foolishness. As for Jews, the idea of a crucified messiah was an oxymoron. They looked for a messiah who would come and triumph over the Romans – not be executed by them. The claim that the crucifixion of Jesus was the center and climax of his messianic role was offensive: “Cursed is everyone who has been hanged on a tree” (Gal. 3:13; cf. Deut. 21:23). For the Jews, the message about a crucified messiah is scandalous.

The proclamation of Christ crucified turns things upside down. Through the message of the cross, the wisdom of the world is made foolish. Through the scandal of the cross, weakness dethrones the powerful. The proclamation of the crucified Messiah is a sword of the spirit. To those who do not respond to this revelation, the cross is scandalous folly. For those who are being saved by this message, the foolishness and weakness of Christ crucified reveals the power and wisdom of God.

Paul uses a variety of metaphors to spell out the saving power and wisdom of the cross. At different times and in different places, Paul speaks of Christ's death in terms of sacrifice, redemption, representation, reconciliation, and conquest of the powers of sin and death. The height, depth, centrality, and expansiveness of Christ's death are beyond the grasp of one image, one metaphor, one theory, one human telling. They all, however, point to the action, initiative, and love of God in Christ. They all also bear fruit in a variety of responses: freedom from bondage, forgiveness of sins, reconciliation to God, righteousness, peace, cruciform lives and cruciform communities.

The wisdom of the cross is decidedly not the wisdom of the world. To Jewish scribes or Gentile philosophers, the message of the crucified Messiah can lead only to tripping over a stumbling block or doubling over in laughter. But for those who respond to such "foolishness," the proclamation of Christ crucified is none other than the power of God unto salvation.

Paul uses this message to take the wind out of the super-spiritual Corinthians' claims to wisdom and power. One wonders if Paul also thought the Corinthian elitists were putting on airs. He reminds them of their calling: "Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But 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." In this passage, Paul seems to be not only proving a point about the wisdom of the cross but also calling out the pretentiousness of the super-spiritual types. That is to say, not only does the word of the cross up-end the Corinthians' claims to wisdom and power, but Paul also points out that even by worldly standards, not many folks had much to boast about. It reminds one of the character Hyacinth Bucket, from the comedy "Keeping Up Appearances," who insists that her surname is pronounced "Bouquet." Or perhaps, for those of us who grew up with the Muppets, one thinks of Miss Piggy saying, "Pretentious? *Mo?*?" Paul seems to be saying to the puffed-up Corinthians that not only are their ideas about wisdom and power at odds with the Gospel but also that they are acting like a group of poseurs in their claims to superior knowledge and abilities.

In addition to pointing out that the super-spiritual Christians were getting too big for their britches, Paul is also saying that the make-up of the church at Corinth is a demonstration of his radical claims about God's wisdom and power. Just look at yourselves, Paul says. Clearly, God is not impressed with worldly power or wisdom because God has called so few who are wise or rich or noble. Rather, God has called many who are "low and despised." The God revealed in Christ crucified has a preference for the lower rungs of society, overturns our ideas about who is wise and who is not, and makes somebodies out of nobodies. Paul reminds them that God "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 crucified Christ is true wisdom and power because it is through him that we have received righteousness,

sanctification, and redemption. When the puffed-up boast about their superior wisdom and abilities, it's not just an instance of arrogance or pretentiousness. It's to miss the whole point of the message about the cross. If anyone at Corinth feels the need to boast, let them boast in the crucified Lord.

It would be nice to tell ourselves that our churches today no longer experience division and scandal, that we no longer have problems with groups of Christians who puff themselves up with claims to superior wisdom and gifts, who demean other Christians whom they think unenlightened, who look with contempt upon other people's vulgar practices or simplistic pieties. But we know that this is not so.

It is always easier to point out these attitudes in others. We think of proponents of the prosperity gospel whose message suggests that Jesus came to bring us bling rather than to call us to take up our cross and follow him on the way of costly love; or of Christian nationalists who seek to wield worldly political power rather than follow the crucified Lord who reigns from the cross; or of self-styled "strong" Christian believers whose promise "to pray for" others often comes across more as condescending dismissal of other peoples' beliefs and practices than a sincere desire to build up the body of Christ; or of hip Christians in skinny jeans and statement glasses who are called to influence the influencers; and so forth and so on ...

But this is too obviously a case of the mote and the beam. How often have we heard fellow Episcopalians say, "In our church, we don't have to check our brains at the door"? The clear implication of such a statement is that we are wiser in our church than people in other churches where presumably they do check their brains at the door. How often have we heard Episcopalians speak condescendingly about the power and beauty of our Anglican liturgy, its rubrical infallibility, and with disdain about other Christians who wouldn't know the difference between a fiddleback chasuble and a pair of PJs. Or how often in Anglican history have we defined ourselves as *not* like those neo-pagan papists or *not* like those holy rolling enthusiasts? All of which is to say, how often have we spoken of ourselves as possessing superior wisdom and looked down upon others whom we deem inferior?

This Tuesday in Holy Week is an opportunity to remember the message of the cross. Through the foolishness and weakness of Christ crucified, God reveals true wisdom and power. The word of the cross overturns all our ideas about worldly power and wisdom: "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong." The proclamation of Christ crucified undercuts any basis for boasting of superior wisdom or super-spiritual gifts. If we must boast, then let us boast only in our crucified Lord. As our collect for today puts it: "O God, by the passion of your blessed Son you made an instrument of shameful death to be for us the means of life: Grant us so to glory in the cross of Christ, that we may gladly suffer shame and loss for the sake of your Son our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever."

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