

The message of the cross

What do you think most people think about the message of the cross? Foolishness or power?

Think about it: God who created all things, who is all powerful, chooses to become incarnate – to send his only begotten son into his own creation. God's son lives as a human being. He teaches about the kingdom of God with wisdom and authority. He heals the sick. He makes the blind see and the lame walk. He turns water into wine, feeds multitudes miraculously and walks on water. He raises people from the dead. And yet the people reject him, and he allows himself to be betrayed. To be mocked, beaten and humiliated. And he allows people to nail him to a cross and kill him.

If you don't understand, if you have that spark of belief, if you don't "get it", it is a crazy message. It is foolishness. But if you do "get it", if you do have your faith in Jesus, then the message of the cross is truly the power of the God.

When he writes "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God," Paul presents a very black and white distinction to the Corinthians. There are only two possible effects of the message of the cross – the death of the saviour of the world for the sake of the world – on one hand it is simply foolishness, something that can be disregarded, or openly mocked; and on the other hand, it is the very power of God.

Hopefully, we know the message of the cross as the power of God. But sometimes we might question, or doubt. Sometimes we might even be embarrassed by the message of the cross. The message of the cross doesn't sit well with the ideas and the philosophies and the world views of most people today. For most people in the world, for people who haven't heard, or who have been taught something else, or who have rejected Jesus, the message of the cross is foolishness.

Though we might know the message of the cross as the power of God, we need to remember that most people, if they are even thinking about such things, are wanting something quite different than the message of Christ's death on the cross.

And such attitudes aren't new.

In verse 22 Paul tells us that "Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom."

The Jews stumbled over the message of the cross because Jesus wasn't the kind of Messiah they wanted. And remember that the nation of Israel was God's chosen people: Delivered from slavery in Egypt, led to the promised land. God had been their God, and they had been God's people. God had given them judges and prophets and kings. And God had promised them a messiah.

But when the messiah came, they rejected him and they crucified him.

And we wonder why they didn't receive him? Paul tells us that was because the "Jews demand[ed] signs..." They were expecting a Messiah who would perform miracles on their behalf.

And while Jesus did perform miracles - giving sight to the blind, making the lame walk, cleansing lepers, feeding multitudes with bread and fish, those weren't the kinds of miracles that the people wanted: They wanted signs of power and success. They wanted a Messiah who would re-establish the Kingdom of Israel like it was at the time of King David.

If he had led an army into battle and defeated the Romans - if he would have shown them that he was successful and victorious - they would have marched behind him and hailed him as messiah.

But instead, Jesus allowed himself to be handed over to his enemies, to be stripped and beaten, to be humiliated, and to be raised up on the cross and crucified.

To the people, dying on a cross wasn't success. It wasn't a victory. It wasn't what they thought their long-awaited Messiah would do.

Not only did they have the wrong concept of the Messiah, they also had the wrong idea about salvation: They thought that the way to salvation was through their own birthright (being God's chosen people) and through their own righteousness. So they were busy keeping the law.

They thought - as many people do today - that by being good people, earnestly keeping God's commandments, and all the supplementary laws that had developed over time, that they could earn God's favour.

And at one level they were just going through the motions, going to the synagogue at the appointed times, saying their prayers loudly, and giving their offerings publicly so everybody was impressed with their generosity. They were outwardly pious and prayerful and generous - but all that came from misguided hope that those things would earn them a reward from God.

But if that's the way to God's favour, it follows that they didn't think they needed a saviour at all. They didn't need anybody to die on the cross for them. So as a result, they kept stumbling over the message of the cross.

If we look at the world; if we honestly examine our own lives; we see so much wrong. People suffer. Relationships are broken. Things go wrong. And we know, I think, that we can't fix all the problems of our own lives, let alone all the problems of the world. We need help. We need the message of the cross - we need Jesus.

And while the Jews demanded signs, Paul tells us that the Greeks looked for wisdom (1:22). The Greeks had many philosophers - Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and so on. Great thinkers.

Contemplation, thinking and understanding was central. The world, they held, would get better through thinking and through gaining knowledge.

Now that sounds familiar: We've been working on that for generations. And education and understanding help. The world is becoming more and more educated. There is more and more knowledge, and it is easier and easier to access. And to some extent things are getting better.

But again, we can also look at the world around us, and see so much wrong.

Do people really think that they can solve all the problems of the world themselves. Through making themselves – and presumably each other – “better”?

The Acts chapter 17 describes the scene when Paul came to Athens: The Athenian philosophers met at the Areopagus, and Luke writes that they “spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.” (Acts 17:21).

Then one day Paul arrived and started telling them about God – a God who was unknown to them. This God came to earth, walked among people, died on the cross and rose again. Many of them sneered at the idea – the message of the cross was all foolishness to those philosophers.

And there are certainly people who think like that today, too:

Common sense tells you that an all-powerful God would not allow puny men to nail his son to a cross. Reason tells you that when a man dies, he cannot come back to life again.

So the Greeks, the philosophers, looked at the cross as foolishness. They didn't need a saviour, because, in their thinking, everybody could just make themselves better.

Two thousand years later, people haven't learned anything new. People are still doing the same things, still committing the same sins, still thinking the same things, still stumbling over the same message of the cross. People are still laughing at the wisdom of God, treating it as foolishness.

There's a temptation, I think, for us to downplay those parts of our faith which people find especially foolish. Perhaps the idea that we all sin and fall short of the glory of God... it might be easier to just emphasise that we are all created in the image of God. Perhaps we could leave out Jesus dying for our sins, and instead say that he died to show us a better way to live. It might be easier to say that Jesus accepts us just as we are, and leave out the part where Jesus wants us to change...

The message of the cross might be foolish to the world at large, but the message of the cross IS the power of God.

In fact, if we adopt an approach of picking and choosing which parts of our faith to promote, and which bits to keep quiet about, we're trying to apply the 'wisdom of the world' to the things of God. We're trying to make a faith, a picture of Jesus, a picture of God, that we can 'sell' to others, rather than being honest and truthful in our faith.

Jesus isn't a product to be packaged and sold. The hope that we have in Jesus is not something to be marketed against other faiths and philosophies, because people today are like the Jews and Greeks of Paul's time.

Just like the Jews who demanded signs, people demand miracles of God. People are disillusioned when prayers aren't answered in the way that they want them answered.

They want God to be what they want when they want it - not who God has revealed himself to be. Have you ever heard someone say "I don't believe in a God who would [do this thing]" or "The God I believe in would not [do this other thing]"?

And just like the Greeks who looked for earthly wisdom, there are those who try to find meaning to life through contemplation, through philosophising, through self-improvement.

As they do that, some people – even people within the church – will seek to change our understanding of the scriptures accordingly. To say that Jesus was a great teacher, but to reject his claims about who he was. To say he was a wise teacher, and perhaps even an example for us, but not a saviour.

And so the message of the cross becomes foolishness to those people.

Paul quotes Isaiah (29:14) when he says, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate." (1:19).

In the face of what God has done for us in the death of Jesus, human wisdom is swept aside, and human intelligence can't make sense of it.

So all the traditional sources of authority – wisdom, the law and logic don't explain the message of the cross "Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age?" (1:20) Paul asks.

Then Paul points to Jesus – "but we preach Christ crucified" (1:23) – the power of God and the wisdom of God.

Christ crucified is what brings us together as Christians. We use the cross as a symbol. But the message of the cross, Jesus' death on that cross at Calvary, his death for each one of us and for all of us, is what is most important:

Mark's gospel tells us that: For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45)

And Paul in his letter to the Romans: God presented [Jesus] as a sacrifice of atonement, though faith in his blood (Romans 3:25a)

The message of the cross is clear. Jesus' death on the cross sets us free from the burden of sin. The price has been paid. All we need do is turn to him in faith.

We need though, to think about where we stand when we contemplate the message of the cross – do we demand signs? Do we look for wisdom? Do we try to find our own way

to salvation? Has the message of the cross become foolishness? Or do we hold it in our hearts as the power of God?

Amen.