

Wade Street Church 25.02.07
To the church of God no 3: Wisdom and Power.
1 Corinthians 1:18 – 2:5

If you've been here the last couple of Sunday mornings, you'll know that we've just begun a series looking at Paul's first letter to the Christians in Corinth. So far we've been introduced to the letter, heard a bit about Corinth- where it was, on the Isthmian peninsular; and the sort of place it was, pretty free by all accounts; mentioned what was happening in the church and how a report about the church had reached Paul from a group meeting in Chloe's household; and looked at how Paul starts the letter. Last week we thought about divisions in the church, and what Paul has to say on the subject: to the Christians in Corinth, to the church generally down through history, and to Wade Street Church, Lichfield in 2007.

Hopefully that jogs our memories a bit, or if you haven't heard the sermons, it gives you a quick summary of the story so far. You can always have a look at the website too, and follow the link to sermons.

This morning we come to a section of the letter dealing with the wisdom and the power of God found in Christ. If you've got your Bibles open you'll see that it's sandwiched between the two bits about division that we looked at last week. And the middle of this sandwich, the meat if you like, has plenty for us to get our teeth into this morning. As we look at it I think we'll find again, as we have done these last two weeks, that what Paul had to say to a group of Christians in first-century Corinth is actually very applicable and relevant to what God may well have to say to a group of Christians in 21st century Middle England.

In Corinth, we know that wisdom and intellect were highly prized, along with position in society and power wielded, and also the ability to speak with eloquence and use rhetoric, or in other words to create 'spin'. Its these three issues that Paul tackles in the passage we've got in front of us today.

Wisdom and Foolishness.

Aristides wrote, 'On every street corner in Corinth one met a so-called wise man who had his own solutions to the world's problems'

Wisdom was so important to the Corinthians that even the catch-phrases of the day reflected it.

There was apparently one that said 'the wise man is king'

Another was 'to the wise man all things belong'.

Greeks were known for their love of philosophy. They revelled in reasoning, argument and intellect.

'Greeks look for wisdom' writes Paul (v22) The trouble is that the message of Jesus is about the most un-wise thing ever. It isn't logical, it doesn't make sense.

The son of God born in human form, to grow up virtually unknown, to go around doing good deeds, to surrender his life into the hands of unscrupulous men and then to die as a common criminal. That doesn't sound very wise. And it didn't sound acceptable to Corinthians who placed such importance on wisdom.

And so here Paul recognises that the message of the cross, of Christ crucified, is a stumbling block to those who put such importance on wisdom.

But its also a stumbling block to Jews too, for a different reason.

To the Jews, Jesus Christ crucified was a complete scandal, because it says in Deuteronomy 21 'cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.' How could the all conquering Messiah, who is to come, end his days hanging on a tree ? That would simply prove that he cannot be the Messiah. The message is a complete non-sense.

I'm sure some of you will remember that one of my favourite books is the Mr Men's Christmas. In fact it was commented on recently to me about the deep theological truths that I have drawn from the mister men. Last time you might remember it was Mr Topsy Turvy travelling upside down and backwards on a sledge. Although I have to confess that I can't actually remember what the theological point to talking about him was !! I'm sure someone will tell me later.

Anyway, this time I'm reminded of Mr Nonsense. Mr Nonsense, as you would expect wears clothes that are a nonsense, says things that are nonsense and does nonsensical things. For example, in the Mr Men Christmas book he suggests that the snow should be brought inside to keep it warm, and insists on wishing people happy birthday instead of happy Christmas.

To both Jews and Greeks, the message of the cross was a complete non-sense, it just did not connect with them. Paul talks several times about 'foolishness'. It would have seemed completely idiotic.

For us, it is difficult to appreciate how shocking and bizarre the message of Christianity was to first century Greco-Romans. Cicero describes crucifixion as 'the most cruel and disgusting penalty.' And Josephus, 'the most disgusting of deaths'. Saviour and crucified just don't go together. They are a non-sense. How could that be described as wisdom ?

But God's wisdom, Paul is writing to point out, is a reversal of the world's. Faith cannot be found by means of intellect, reasoning, and rational argument, nor can it be found by seeking signs and proofs, as some Jews hoped for.

And that, I think is our initial point where the first and 21st centuries connect. Society is constantly trying to make sense of belief and faith, to understand it, rationalise it, explain it, apply logic to it. And have found, just as the Greco-Romans did, that it just doesn't work.

The other thing that society seems to be busy doing is trying to prove or disprove faith. Again, as the Jews in Corinth found, it doesn't work. We cannot prove the truths of our faith.

But I don't think Paul was writing simply to contrast Christian truth with contemporary Greek and Jewish wisdom. Paul was writing about this to the Christians at Corinth because it was an issue for them in the church. The wisdom of the world, that is the standards and expectations surrounding them, was affecting the Corinthian church, and we need to be alert to that too.

David Prior, in his commentary on 1 Corinthians writes, 'It is important for Christians today to appreciate the ways in which our thinking has been influenced by the

secularism of our own age, in the same way as Paul found it necessary to uncover for the church at Corinth the emptiness and the folly of contemporary thinking.’

The cross is a nonsense, yet God chose to make it make sense.

Power and Weakness.

V27 But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of the world and the despised things – and the things that are not- to nullify the things that are.

Not only does God turn wisdom on its head and make a complete nonsense of it, but he does the same with power, so that the weak and powerless are actually the ones who are strong.

Paul uses the example of the make-up of the Christian Church in Corinth to support his point. Not many were wise, not many were influential. Not many, it says were of noble birth. The church in Corinth it seems, was mainly composed of people from the lower classes of society. But Corinth wasn’t unusual in that respect, because Christianity spread most rapidly amongst the lower classes of Mediterranean society.

The Bible is full of examples of the all-powerful God using weak human beings for his work. People like Moses; and Gideon’s army of three hundred; the first disciples, and ultimately the cross as the divine irony when weakness becomes strength. God does the unexpected, works through those we least expect.

There were a few from the elite of society in the Corinthian church, but not many. Put into today’s language, they were the new money, but without the underlying status to accompany it. There was almost certainly some snobbery within the church and Paul cuts across this, saying, now look, if there’s going to be boasting, make it boasting about God. He echoes a verse from Jeremiah about boasting in understanding and knowledge of God. Boasting about status and wealth and possessions means nothing, because hasn’t God inverted all that status, turned it on its head, with the death and resurrection of Jesus ?

Paul flags up the dangers of the church getting caught up in the world’s standards where priority is given to the articulate, the well-off, the powerful and influential. Where many voices are not heard. And here’s another point where the first and 21st centuries connect. There is a danger in any church of allowing the powerful to control it, and Wade Street is no exception. But if we are alert to it, there’s less likelihood of it happening, and more likelihood of us taking measures to combat it.

Paul challenges elite status and worldly power – power in the social sense.

Preaching

And finally, in the last few verses that we’re looking at this morning, Paul uses his preaching and speaking as an example of how he came to Corinth in weakness and relied on God’s power alone, rather than on persuasive argument and clever words. In

Paul's world, eloquence was a mark of education and respectability. Eduard Norden says that, 'Paul wrote these words (that is the first few verses of chapter 2) at a time when it was not possible to be considered wise without being eloquent'

The Isthmian games, second only to the Olympic Games, and held in Corinth, included speech competitions as part of the events..

It was usual for new speakers arriving in a city to advertise themselves, then give a speech and try to impress, win over, the people. If they attracted enough followers they would stay. Paul makes it quite clear that he did not operate like that. He spoke about something that was both unpalatable and unpopular, the death and resurrection of Jesus.

I wonder what you think makes good preaching ? Now there's an interesting survey to carry out sometime !! Is it the length, (anyone who has read Adrian Plass will know that he measures sermons by the number of fruit gums he can eat) is it the number of jokes, the entertainment value, the preacher, the theology...?

Or is it, as Paul is indicating here, the straight forward message combined with the Holy Spirit's work ?

I think here Paul's teaching releases us from getting all hung up about how we present the gospel. The power of the gospel itself is sufficient.

Of course, we want our presentation to be the best it can be, and we want it to be delivered in an up-to-date style, and in a technologically relevant way, but the message hasn't changed these last two thousand or so years.

Clever words and fancy presentations don't convince people to follow Christ. The message of God's love, grace and power through Christ is message enough. If we try to add to it or improve it in any way we run the risk of getting in a mess.

As Ian commented a couple of weeks ago, Lichfield is a city that likes its culture, likes its heritage, likes its intellectualism – that's okay- as long as we don't try to twist the gospel and make it fit. If we do that we run the risk of going off course. The message of the cross is foolishness, but God has made it wisdom. It is weakness, but God has made it powerful.

We finish with the words of Craig Keener:

'If Paul were addressing us today, he would undoubtedly invite us to recover the costliness of the cross, to embrace it and articulate its claims even when they do not prove popular.'

House Group Notes 25.02.07
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In Corinth, wisdom and intellect were highly prized, along with position in society and power wielded, and also the ability to speak with eloquence and use rhetoric, or in other words to create 'spin'. It is these three issues that Paul tackles in the passage.

Wisdom – The 'wisdom' of the cross was foolishness to the Greeks and Jews in Corinth. It was a nonsense because it did not stand up to Greek logical argument or philosophy. Neither did it make sense to Jews as a crucified Messiah was an impossibility.

Power - most Christians in Corinth were from the lower classes, but there were a few from the higher levels of society. There was probably a certain amount of snobbery, and control by the more powerful.

Paul was keen to show that in God's eyes it is the powerless who have power.

Preaching - Paul refused to use rhetoric and persuasive argument when preaching the gospel. He thought the message itself and the Holy Spirit's work should be enough.

'If Paul were addressing us today, he would undoubtedly invite us to recover the costliness of the cross, to embrace it and articulate its claims even when they do not prove popular.' Craig Keener.

For Discussion.

1. The message of the cross is described as 'foolishness'.
Which parts of the gospel do you find hard to accept/understand and which do you find easy ?
2. Can you identify areas where the church has allowed worldly wisdom to enter ?
Do you see that as being good or bad ?
3. Which biblical characters portray for you God's transformation of weakness into strength. eg Moses
4. How can we make sure that it is not just the powerful whose voices are heard in church ?
5. What do you think makes a good sermon ?.