

Sunday 29th January 2017 Cathedral, Grahamstown 7.30 a.m.		Epiphany 4 Series on 1 Corinthians
Micah 6:1-8	Ps 15	1 Corinthians 1:18-31
		Matthew 5:1-12
WE PROCLAIM CHRIST CRUCIFIED		

“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.... Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified...” (1 Cor 1:18, 22-23)

We continue with the sermon series – the journey – through 1 Corinthians.

To read 1 Corinthians is to explore the life of the early church, and the concerns they faced, the challenges they encountered – to see something of the “life, loves, and hates of a particular church at the inception of Christianity”.

But to read 1 Corinthians is also to find ourselves in these pages: We find “that the life, loves, and hates to which the text bears witness are ours as well...” (Barton, 1314)

So this journey through 1 Corinthians, between now and the start of Lent, and then to be concluded after Trinity Sunday later in the year, is a wonderful opportunity to explore and attempt to understand the life and world of the church in Corinth; but also to be shaped and guided by the teaching and message of this book: to take seriously its continuing significance in the life of the church today.

“We have to read it as the ‘word of God’ for the church in its mission to the world.” (Barton, 1314)

Background

A letter written by the apostle Paul, to the church in Corinth – a church that he had founded, planted, through preaching and through

conversion. It was a church close to his heart. He had received news of divisions and internal strife in the church, and had also received a letter asking a number of questions. 1 Corinthians is his initial reply.

Corinth was a large city, a trading centre, a major sea port, a centre for ship-building, a centre of industry, a centre for the arts; a mixture of races and cultures and religious practice and belief. Inhabitants came from far and wide. Corinth was a place of many religions – Greek and Roman gods and goddesses, Egyptian religions, mystic religions and cults; there was a large Jewish community. The early Christian converts came from these traditions, with their life-styles, worship practices and beliefs.

A call for unity

Paul begins his letter (after the opening words of greeting and thanksgiving) with a heartfelt call for unity (1:10-17).

“I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.” (1 Cor 1:10)

He takes them back, away from their divisions and cliques, their family loyalties, to “the fundamental reordering of status and power” that we find in the gospel: “For Christ did not send me to baptise but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent words of wisdom [without recourse to the skills of rhetoric], so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power” (1 Cor 1:17).

God’s foolishness displayed in the crucified Messiah (1:18-25)

“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.... Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a

stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles...” (1 Cor 1:18, 22-23)

Paul contrasts the “message of the cross” and human wisdom. What was meant by this “wisdom”? There has been much debate on this:

This “human wisdom” is the learning of this world, scientific discoveries, insights into human behaviour, understanding of the natural world, medical skills – much of these good in themselves, and adding value and insight – this is not anti-intellectual; rather, but is placed by Paul in contrast to “the foolishness of God” displayed in the crucified Messiah.

This “human wisdom” is the beliefs and world views and philosophies which speak of no God, or of an absent God, or of a distant, cold God, or which have no room for the Creator in their world of economics and politics and scientific materialism, those for whom any talk of God is laughable or absurd; those who argue the impossibility of God’s intervention into our world (the basic thesis of Greek philosophy?); the secular spirit of our age.

This “wisdom” comes direct from heaven by revelation of the Spirit. Its goal is salvation through acquiring true knowledge about the ultimate nature of reality and how to live accordingly. We think of modern-day spiritual writers, those who present the faith, who set themselves up as *the* spiritual gurus and people to turn to, some of our modern-day “prophets”, perhaps even some of our favourite authors – many of them good, with insights to offer – but again, in Paul’s books, salvation is through the cross of Christ, not through following the latest fad or trend or spiritual writer.

God’s foolishness - which, Paul argues, is wiser than human wisdom (here Paul is using an extreme argument of contrasts in order to make his point) - is seen in the crucified Christ. True wisdom is not to be found in weighty words from gifted speakers – the “one who is wise”, the “scribe” (Jewish scholar), the “debater of this age” (vs 20). True wisdom, Paul says, is found in the cross of Christ – a stumbling block

to some, madness to others, “but to those who are the called, whether Jews or Greeks [whatever our background] ... Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” (1 Cor 1:24).

God’s foolishness displayed in the identity of those who are called (1 Cor 1:26-31)

Paul begins this section by insulting the Corinthian Christians!

“Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many 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.” (1 Cor 1:26-28)

These early Christians in the eyes of the world were nobody special: apart from a few, they may well have come from the poorer end, the lower end of the social scale. They were not amongst the powerful or the elite in the community, they were not, generally speaking, from among the “beautiful people”. They were a very mixed bag, from all over, perhaps not the place to be, those with the latest fashions, the wealthy – yet in the cross of Christ “God was [and is] doing something totally new which turns human values and social patterns upside down.” (Barton pg 1319).

Our ideas of status and hierarchy and class and power, who we consider to be important in our community – all these are put into the melting pot by the cross of Christ. When we become Christians, our values of human worth, of relationships, power, status – all these change and must change. “The ground is level at the foot of the cross.”

“God chose what is foolish... God chose what is weak... God chose what is low and despised... things that are not...” - “a statement of radical grace.” No longer will human pride and achievement be the

basis for our identity. Instead, our identity is found in God's call and choosing.

The centrality of the cross to our salvation

What is the gospel, the good news that we proclaim? What is the message about the cross of Christ?

“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that all who believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” (Jn 3:16)

“Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures...” (1 Cor 15:3)

“He loved me and gave himself for me...” (Gal 2:20)

“While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us...” (Rom 5:8)

Part of the good news is that through the death of Jesus we are saved from sin. But let this not become a private, even selfish way of seeing things – only about meeting our need of forgiveness, salvation and eternal life in heaven – but with no difference in the wider world, beyond our own four walls.

Instead, the crucifixion of Christ should be seen as “the day the revolution began” (Tom Wright). Something happened on that first Good Friday, something that changed the world. With this event, God put into operation his plan for the rescue of the world.

“Jesus died to make us restored human beings with a vocation to play a vital part in God's purposes for the world.” (Wright). Christians are called daily to grapple with what this means – including the challenges we face in our community and country; those in the USA facing the terrifying reality of a Trump presidency.

CONCLUSION

We are saved by the cross of Christ, into a restored relationship with God.

We are saved by the grace of God, into a new community.

We are part of the revolution, part of God's transforming power to restore and renew the world. The cross of Christ and God's power in us, is God's antidote, God's medicine, for a sick, decaying, broken world.

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