

God's Foolishness

Epistle: 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

Gospel: John 2:13-22

Lent 3

Try imagining someone turning up at work with a small gold electric chair around her neck, or seeing someone in the pub with a hangman's noose emblazoned on his T shirt, or visiting your neighbour and facing a picture of a guillotine in the entrance hall. We would find such images shocking, but how often do we stand back and acknowledge how strange our faith looks. We Christians claim that the most important divine action in history is the humiliating death of a poor Jew at the hands of an occupying power. The central Christian symbol is the ancient equivalent of a hangman's noose or an electric chair. Instead of a dramatic demonstration of God's strength and power, we affirm his weakness and failure. It's odd. And it's as odd to us now as it was to the early Christians.

Paul recognized the oddity, even the absurdity of such a god. The claim that a convicted criminal was the bringer of God's forgiving and transforming love was hard for anyone to swallow, and for some especially so. But he still insists, "We proclaim Christ crucified, a scandal to Jews, and a joke to Greeks". And, I would add, a stumbling block to most of the world.

But Paul soldiers on: "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom". And when you look through the history of God's people, there are times when you wonder what on earth God is up to, starting with his announcement to Abraham and his wife Sarah, both in their nineties, that Sarah would be celebrating her next birthday in the maternity ward. The child, he added was to be called Issac, which in Hebrew means laughter, perhaps indicating that all three were sharing in a holy joke.

Who can say why God makes the choices he does? Who can explain why he chose not honest and reliable Esau, but his lying and cheating younger brother Jacob? Or why he sent Moses, a murderer, and a stammerer who couldn't put a complete sentence together to wrangle with pharaoh about the fate of God's people? For that matter, of all the races God might have chosen to be his holy people, what led him to opt for most cantankerous and fickle group of complainers you could ever hope to meet? "I will be your God, and you shall be my people", God told them, and before the words had stopped ringing in their ears they were dancing around a golden calf like mad things.

Yet it was these people who went on to produce David, a great king, but also another murderer, and an adulterer. The result of David's adultery was Solomon, whom God gifted with an IQ of 190, which must have been useful when it came to dealing with quarrels between his 700 wives. Solomon was the ancestor of a long line of kings, ending in the greatest king of all time. "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom".

And much of Jesus' life could also be regarded as a kind of folly. He was born in a stable, alongside cows and chickens. Few knew who he was, but even those in the know didn't always remember it. At times his mother and brothers thought he was out of his mind and tried to restrain him (Mark 3:21). Thousands witnessed his miracles of healing and casting out demons and feeding a whole football field with five loaves and two fishes, but his audience just shrugged their shoulders and waited for the next sign.

Unlike the prophets before him, Jesus had little to say about the international situation and Israel's place in it. Instead, he told stories that few people understood, least of all his disciples: The kingdom of God? Rather than a lecture on the reorganization of society or the doctrine of salvation, he talked about yeast and mustard seeds and finding a diamond ring in a field. God was an eccentric host who, when his high class guests failed to show up at the gala dinner, went into the slums and soup kitchens and brought home society's dregs. "I have come to bring good news to the poor", he said, when he himself was as poor as a church mouse. "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up". What on earth is he talking about? He's a carpenter's son, not an ecclesiastical architect. "And blessed is the one who takes no offense at me" (Matt. 11:5-6), which most of those in authority certainly did.

And then there is the folly of the cross, a scandal to Jews and foolishness to Greeks. The church in Corinth, which Paul was addressing was made up of both Jews and Greeks, The Greeks, raised on logic and reason sought wisdom and understanding that was neat and tidy. To say that "The Word was made flesh" was ridiculous. To say that the Word suffered and died a humiliating death on a cross was offensive and impossible. In the Greek pantheon, gods didn't die

As the Greeks looked for wisdom, the Jews demanded signs. And not any signs, but signs of power and strength. This was understandable. For millennia, they had been on the losing side of history. It was natural to hope for a Davidic king-messiah, whose majesty would sweep all the nations before him.

And what about us today? Musing on what kind of a God we might desire, the pastor John Buchanan writes, "Of course we would prefer a more traditional

God, a God of power and might, a God who rules from a throne in heaven, a God who hurls thunderbolts and is seen in the powerful wind and storms of nature ... We'd prefer the God Michelangelo painted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel: huge, muscular, potent, like the Zeus of Greek mythology. That's a God to fire the soul and stiffen the backbone".

But then tragedy strikes. A baby dies. You lose your job. A relationship breaks down. And suddenly that all-powerful, muscular God becomes aloof and indifferent.

Buchanan then adds "Michelangelo created another image of God ... his Pieta, the lifeless form of a young man, cradled in the arms of his mother. It is a far truer and much more powerful portrayal of what Christian faith means by the word God" (*No story so divine*. 2002).

The Greeks looked for wisdom, the Jews wanted strength. What was missing was heart. No mention of love, vulnerability or hope.

"Blessed are the meek ... Blessed are the merciful ... Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake". Jesus was all that and more - the incomprehensible God of love come to live among the poor, the rejected and the marginalized, the wounded healer who turns the world upside down, making glory out of humiliation, victory out of defeat, life out of death.

"The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing. But to those of us who are being saved it is the power of God".

Amen

Martha Taft Golden
Benefice service during
Coronavirus lockdown
7th March, 2021