

# The wisdom of the cross in the midst of human chaos

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

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## Intro

Throughout all centuries, the Church has praised God for the cross on which Jesus Christ died. Our faith has always been focused on a suffering Lord. I believe that this is the reason why as Christians we naturally gravitate to other people who suffer, to help them carry their burdens.

This country where we live goes through a phase of suffering. Half of the population lives below the poverty line. Millions of people feel hopeless. No wonder many are rising up, out of a desire for change.

Does the Gospel of Jesus Christ have anything to say in this context? I cannot pretend to have easy solutions, but I do believe that what St Paul writes about the wisdom of the cross of Christ has something to say to us in the present circumstances.

## 1 Wisdom and power of the world

For people who used their mind in the time of the Roman Empire, the concept of a God who came to this world as a man to die on a cross, was really stupid.

How can any thinking person believe that God becomes a human being? Listen to this Greek writer, Celsus, and how he attacked Christianity:

God is good and beautiful and happy and He is that which is most beautiful and best. If then He descends to man it involves change for Him and change from good to bad, from beautiful to ugly, from happiness to unhappiness, from what is best to what is worst. God would never accept such a change!

God can simply not do something like that, was the conclusion of the intelligent thinkers. The idea that this God would die on a cross, was even more absurd for them.

About 150 years ago a building was excavated on the Palatine Hill in Rome. During the second century, it was used as a boarding-school for boys. We know that in this boy's home, there was a Christian boy called Alexamenos. How do we know?

On one of the walls another boy in the home had sketched a picture of a cross with a boy beside it. On the cross hangs a crucified donkey. In boyish handwriting we read under the picture: Alexamenos worships [his] god.

One of the boys in that home made this blasphemous picture, to joke about the stupidity of Alexamenos who worshipped someone who died on a cross...

For Greek philosophers, God could simply not become a man. And the *religious* people in the time of St

Paul, the Jews, *also* believed the Christian message to be scandalous.

For them the message of the cross is a stumbling block, St Paul says. The Greek word for stumbling block is *skandalon*, and that really means: something scandalous. In the Jewish lawbook we read:

If a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God. You shall not defile your land. (Deuteronomy 21:22-23)

So to think that Jesus on the cross is the wisdom and the power of God, was unthinkable just as presently, many religious people deny the possibility that God could ever become man, or that a good prophet like Jesus could die on a cross. It goes against all of our natural religious feelings to believe that God Almighty could compromise himself by becoming human and die.

But as Christians we do believe that God became a human being, and that he suffered for our sake on the cross. Yes, this was humiliating for God, but he was prepared to suffer this because of love. Because the most powerful God decided to bow down for the sake of us, his people, we love and honor him.

This example of God is not bad at all to follow for any of us. We do not want to misuse our power in our work, in our church, or wherever we have power, for our own sake, but the power we have, we use in service to others. God – in Christ – left this great example for us.

## 2 Wisdom and Power of God

In the context where we live, this seems so inconceivable. Governments rule, people rise up, and we all demand our rights, even at the expense of others, even at the expense of wounding and killing others – if only we can keep what we have or get what we want.

People who only focus on their rights will have difficulty grasping the beauty of the Gospel of a God who did not hold on to his rights, but who incarnated and died. It is much easier to believe in a God who stands for all I want, than in a God who shows that it is more blessed to give than to receive, better to suffer than to make someone else suffer.

In order to undermine our preconceived ideas about God and what he can or cannot do, in order to undermine the idea that we, human beings can put God in a box that is defined by our own logic, our own wisdom, our own religious ideas, our own needs, God decided to save humankind by the foolishness of becoming a man and dying on a cross.

By the message of the cross, God undermines all people who worship their own mind, their own ideas, their own rights, their own demands. The message of the cross shows us a God whose total focus – is on the other, not on himself.

And by the same Gospel message, God undermines the self-confidence of all religious people who have fancy ideas about God, but who cannot accept Jesus as their Lord and God – because he did not give them enough miraculous proof in accordance with their pre-conceived theology.

The reason why Paul brings this issue up in his letter, was because the church in Corinth was suffering from divisions. People were fighting one another. Many members had brought their Greek philosophy or Jewish theology into the church, and the community was thereby torn apart.

Paul himself was also badly criticized. Many people did not think that Paul's delivery of the Gospel message was in accordance with the best rules of Greek rhetorical speech. He was not impressive enough.

For the Jews, beautiful delivery of the message was not as important as it was for the Greeks. They were more focused on getting proof of authority by miracles. They believed that Paul did not do enough miracles, so they doubted his credentials as an apostle. He came across as weak. He was not the leader they wanted. Her did not give them what they demanded.

So Paul says to the congregation: Look at yourself. How can you introduce these criteria into the Church? Why adopt this snobbish view of eloquent speech? Why criticize me for not being a great miracle worker? Look at yourself. Are you all powerful miracle doers? And the majority of you are not from that pretentious eloquent class of people either.

What Paul reminds them of, is that when God called them, through his simple preaching, they were ordinary people. For God, that was good enough. So be a little humble, don't think too high of yourself. That attitude is better for the community life of the Church. And it is better for our society.

To underline that they were not so special, Paul repeats words that underline that it was God who took the initiative to draw them into his Church. He called them. Paul uses words like: your calling, God chose, God chose, God chose...

And a proper response to God calling us by the Gospel of Jesus Christ is not pretentious talk and fights about true wisdom and real power – a proper response is thankfulness, humility, faith, and love; that does not create division, but it ties people together.

In society this is also what we need. A government that humbly cares for its people and does not treat them as cockroaches. A nation of people looking for the welfare of each other instead of I, me and my demands first. And this is not only needed urgently in Egypt, but in all of our societies.

I do not want to sound simplistic. There are times when we must rule and be decisive, and times when we must stand up for our rights. That is the duty in our

jobs, in Church, in our families, and in society. But if this is not oriented to the welfare of all people, to what is good for the other, it will not lead to something much better, but to more of the same. The only change will be that my wisdom becomes prevalent, and my power.

This happened in the church in Corinth. Some leaders wanted to dump Paul because they wanted to lead. Not love for Jesus Christ, but the love for their own wisdom and power prevailed.

Why was Jesus Christ not enough for the church in Corinth? Why do we, in our own churches, often see an infatuation with the wisdom of the world, with popular preachers, with shows of power and miracles? Is our Lord Jesus Christ not enough for us?

### 3 All blessings in Jesus Christ

God may have seemed foolish by choosing a crib and a cross, but that was his choice. Exactly in the weakest moment of Jesus Christ, on the cross, his love for us has been revealed. This is God's chosen manner of saving us.

To suggest that God cannot be like this, is limiting the power and wisdom of God – and doing so is really rebellion against Him. He is almighty and all-wise, and he decided to save humankind through becoming a man and dying on a cross.

Jesus Christ is the power and the wisdom of God. This wisdom and power restores our relationship with God; it helps us focus on love for God and for each other. On suffering, if necessary, for the other and certainly not making others suffer.

If the wise and strong people of this world, on whatever side of the conflict on Tahrir or wherever, would accept this self-revelation of God and apply it in their behavior, they would save their lives and their society, and inject more love and selfless acts into it. This is the cement that holds people together, in our families, in our Church and in our land.

A God who had to become human and die on a cross, may seem humiliating for God; but he suffered that humiliation to show us his deep love for us. It is also humbling for us. For our sins he came, for our sins he died. To reject the idea that God could do this for us, means that we do not take the wickedness of our own sins serious enough. The rejection of this sacrifice of Jesus Christ therefore also contains a dangerous element of pride.

In the year 1707 Isaac Watts wrote the beautiful hymn:

When I survey the wondrous cross  
On which the Prince of glory died,  
My richest gain I count but loss,  
And pour contempt on all my pride.

Believing in the cross of Christ is the best antidote against the poison of pride that separates people. Faith in the cross of Christ, and pride in our abilities whether of eloquence or spirituality or the ability to manage or rule a land, do not go together well.

For those of us who have come to grasp the depth of our own wickedness, this Gospel, this cross of Christ, is what we rejoice in. He came to save us by his grace.

In Jesus Christ, the one who was born in our world and who died on that cross, God gave us all we need – full salvation. What a divine wisdom! And the only thing we must do, is to stay connected with him in faith and obey Him with our love for God and for our fellow human being.

Serving that crucified Lord opens for us the doors of personal salvation, the entrance into the World of God, but it is also the best medicine for a sick society. Why should we want anything from this world that contradicts Him? And why should we not introduce into our life, at home, at work, on Tahrir Square, all things that are in line with this crucial show of the love of God?

## Conclusion

We must be very careful that as followers of Jesus Christ we do not place the wisdom of our world above the wisdom of the Apostles who gave us a perfect description of how God has come very close to us in his Son, through the cross.

Jesus Christ is the one we hold onto, and let us stay far away from any idea, faith, philosophy, behavior, or feeling, that contradicts this Gospel of the cross. Not only because it lowers the value of Jesus Christ and what he did for us, but also because it damages our Christian bond of unity with one another; because it damages our life, even the social life in our country.

Our community, the cords that bind us together, are becoming ever stronger, if we, each individually, focus our faith, and love, and mind, on the one crucified Lord who is the Lord of our life, the head of our Church, and as King of Kings, even the Lord of this land.

**+ In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit**