

The scandalous wisdom of the cross

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. Listen to these words of St Theodore (758-826) a Greek-Orthodox saint

O most precious gift of the cross! How splendid it looks! [...] It is a tree which begets life, [...]; which sheds light, [...]; which does lead to Paradise [...]; it is the wood which Christ ascended, as a king mounting his chariot, to defeat the devil who had usurped the power of death, and to set mankind free. [...] This wood [...] healed the effects of sins and the wounds which the pernicious dragon had inflicted on our nature. That supreme wisdom which [...] exposed the boasts and the foolish arrogance of the wisdom of the world. (from his *Oratio in Adorationem Crucis*)

The Church praises the Cross of Christ, while people outside the Church think it is foolish. How come we have such a different view of this heart of the Christian faith?

1 Wisdom and power of the world

The Ancient Greeks were totally in love with philosophy. Herodotus, the great Greek historian of antiquity, says: 'All Hellenes are zealous for all sorts of wisdom.' (*Histories* 4.77)

For all people who really used their mind in the time of the early church, the wise and scientifically thinking people of the Roman Empire, the concept of a God who comes to the 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. And 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 *Paedagogium* or boarding-school for boys. And 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 most people in the time of the apostle Paul, this idea that we worship a Lord who was crucified as a criminal, hung on a cross, was a contradiction in terms. Jesus looked like the worst imaginable criminal and loser.

God cannot become a man, and the idea that he died on a cross makes that idea even more ridiculous, according to the best *scientific and philosophical* thinkers of those days. The *religious* people, 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. Haraam really. Just as presently, the Islamic religion denies 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 the God Almighty could compromise himself by becoming human. And our natural religious sense is also that good people are rewarded by God, and that bad people are punished.

2 Wisdom and Power of God

So the gospel of Jesus Christ has always been inconceivable. We all have our preconceived ideas about God and what he can or cannot do. But precisely 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, God decided to save mankind by the foolishness of becoming a man and dying on a cross.

By the message of the cross, God undermines all intellectuals who worship their own mind and their self

created views of god, but who reject the Lord our God and his revelation through his Son Jesus Christ.

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 preconceived theology.

The reason why Paul brings this issue up in his letter, was because the church in Corinth was suffering from divisions. 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.

Many of the philosophies of that time not only focused on the content of what they were teaching, but just as much on beautiful delivery. They put high value on eloquence. That sort of wisdom was seen as gift from above.

In this context, I have often wondered... if only I had been born as a native English speaker. Then I would be able to speak so much better. But I was born Dutch... I comfort myself with the fact that were I born as an English speaker, I would probably not speak any other languages.

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.

If you remember, Paul began his letter in Chapter 1 with this statement: 'you were enriched in all speech and knowledge... and you are not lacking in any spiritual gift...' The Church in Corinth thought of itself as top class in respect to eloquence and charismatic miracles. Moving speech, powerful impact. But with this attitude, they were tearing the body of Jesus Christ apart.

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.

Consider your calling brothers; not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. (1 Corinthians 1:26)

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.

Paul repeats words that underline that not those rather ordinary people took the initiative when they became Christians, but that it was God who took the initiative. He called them. Paul uses, in verses 26 to 28, words like: your calling, God chose, God chose, God chose...

About this, Josemaria Escriva, the founder of the Opus Dei movement, writes:

When [God] invites a soul to live a life fully in accordance with the faith, he does not set store by merits of fortune, nobility, blood or learning. God's call precedes all merits. [...] Vocation comes first. God loves us before we even know how to go toward him, and he places in us the love with which we can respond to his call. (St Josemaria Escriva, *Christ is passing by*, p. 33.)

A proper response in church to the Gospel of Jesus Christ is not pretentious talk about wisdom and power - a proper response is faith, and love; that does not create division, but it ties people together.

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

Jesus Christ is the power and the wisdom of God, is what St Paul underlines. And this wisdom and power does not focus on externals, like beautiful preaching or on the miraculous, but on our hearts and on our relationship with God. On redemption from sin. On salvation. On obedience. On love for God and for each other. On strength while suffering. On eternal life.

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.

By coming close to us, looking very unwise and weak, he saves us, us imperfect people. And exactly in this imperfection, this weakness of ours, his power and wisdom have become visible.

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. Whatever "wise" and "strong" people think of this.

God's choice to save us through his incarnation and by the foolishness of the cross, means our salvation. But at the same time, it means condemnation for any humanly contrived idea about God that at the very basis refuse to bend the heart for Him.

A God who had to become human and die on a cross, may be humiliating for God; but he suffered that humiliation to show us his deep love for us. That God did this is very 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. And that we do not take the love of God seriously enough.

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 of eloquence or spirituality do not go together.

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. St Paul finishes in verse 30 with a summary.

It is because of him (that is, God the Father), that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.

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 in faith and with obedience. Serving that crucified Lord opens for

us the doors of salvation, the entrance into the World of God. Why should we want anything from this world that contradicts Him?

Conclusion

We must be very careful that we do not, as followers of Jesus Christ, 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 any idea, faith, philosophy that contradicts this Gospel of the cross, let us keep it far away from us. 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.

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 heart of his Church and of our life.

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