

1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5
The cross is good enough
Notes from a sermon preached at Christ Church Liverpool

What was your expectation as you came here this morning? I hope that our expectation is that we will hear God speak. Not because there's anything particularly wonderful about the sermon – believe me I've read it! – but because we're going to be looking together into God's word. And when we look into the Bible we can expect to hear him speak through it. Indeed looking into the Bible is the only way that God has promised to speak to us. And in order to hear what God has to say to us through the pages of this letter, we need to go back to Corinth.

Because one of the amazing things about the Bible is that it was all written for us, it was all written for our benefit, in order that we might know the living God and experience his love and his grace. But the Bible wasn't written **to** us. So we can't just randomly lift a few thoughts off the page and say – that's what God is telling me this morning.

Because the Bible is not God direct to me but God, through a human author, here the Apostle Paul, to the original readers – here the Christians in Corinth to me.

Now that doesn't mean to say that we have to go outside the Bible. Because everything we **need** to know about the city of Corinth and the Christian people who lived there that this letter was written to, is actually contained within the bible itself.

Corinth was one of the cities where the apostle Paul had planted a church. You can read all about it in Acts 18. He stayed there for as long as 18 months, one of the longest church planting visits he made. It seems from that account in Acts and from what we are told in Paul's 2 letters – that we call 1 and 2 Corinthians that the church in Corinth was composed mainly of converted pagans from the lower classes of society – the slaves and freedmen. There were a few wealthy families and a few people from Jewish backgrounds – but not many.

So we've got a church made up, mostly, of poor people who used to worship the many gods of the Roman empire. And by the time Paul writes this letter it seems that things are not going well in the church at Corinth.

In fact it seems that there are all sorts of problems with the lifestyle and behaviour of the Christians:

- sexual misconduct (chs 5, 7)
- suing each other (ch 6)
- divorce (ch 7)
- drunkenness (ch 11)
- eating in pagan temples (chs 8-11)
- abusing the communion service (ch 11)
- misuse of spiritual gifts (chs 12-14)

And we'll see lots more about all of those as we study together through this letter over the next months.

But as far as the apostle Paul was concerned there was a more important issue at stake in Corinth than any of those problems. Behind all the complex moral and theological issues that we'll find in 1 Corinthians lies one fundamental question. One question that Paul addresses throughout this letter:

What does it mean to be spiritual?

It's an incredibly simple question isn't it?

What does it mean to be spiritual?

Just 7 words.

But, as we'll see, the Corinthians had got the answer to that question wrong. And that had massive effects of that on their church, on their personal godliness, on their witness and, especially, on their relationship with the apostle Paul, who had founded the church.

Having studied 1 Corinthians quite a lot over the last few years I've come to the conclusion that today many churches in our country and around the world are still getting the answer to that question wrong.

What does it mean to be spiritual?

And I believe that the wrong answers the Corinthians came up with are particularly common in young, enthusiastic, growing churches like ours.

And, as I hope we'll see over the next few weeks, if we get wrong what it means to be spiritual then the effect on our lives and the life of our church will be disastrous.

What does it mean to be spiritual?

It's an important question isn't it?

Do you want to see God's power at work in your life and in our church?

Do you want to be a spiritual person?
Well in this letter Paul, God's chosen messenger, 1v1 there, God's apostle, has lots to say about how we can get hold of the power and wisdom of God.

Have you ever tried to share your faith with someone and got to the bit where you talk about the cross and just thought – this really is very silly? I have. Sometimes the cross seem silly. I mean let's face it – it is a bit odd isn't it? A man is executed 2000 years ago is executed and Christians go round saying this is the single most important event in history. Haven't you ever wondered whether God couldn't have expressed his love and satisfied his justice in a different way? In a slightly more attractive way?

After all God is God. I'm sure that if he'd wanted to God could have found another way. But he didn't. God chose to use the cross. Have you ever wondered why that might be? Why did God choose the cross as the way to rescue people?

The Christians in Corinth had certainly thought about that question. They had reflected on the cross and, it seems, came to the conclusion that frankly it wasn't very impressive. The cross just didn't appeal to the people they wanted to join their church. The cross seemed to be a complete turn off to the wise men and the philosophers and the Jewish scribes and teachers of the law.

So it seems that the Corinthians wanted to improve the cross. They wanted a cross with a little more panache. A makeover for the Christian message. Something to give it a little more wisdom. They felt that everything about the Christian message and Christian people was weak. And they wanted an improvement.

But Paul wanted the Corinthians, and us, to know that it is in the weakness and foolishness of the cross that God's power and wisdom can be most clearly seen.

1 God's power is seen in a foolish cross (1:18-25)

In the introduction to one of his plays the famous playwright George Bernard Shaw writes about the way in which one of his characters:

"grasps the central truth of Christianity and discards its central superstition: that central truth being the vanity of revenge and punishment, and that central superstition being the salvation of the world by the gibbet."

Clever and sophisticated people – whether they are Corinthian wise men, 20th century playwrights or the bright young things who live in halls of residence or yuppie flats in Liverpool city centre – have always found the cross foolish.

So, Christians might be forgiven for asking, why God? God why have you not made your message more attractive to the movers and shakers of the world? Why not come up with a means of salvation that is more appealing, more comprehensible to the thinkers and leaders in society?

Well Paul tells us here that the reason God chose the cross is quite simple. God chose the cross because he hates human self-sufficiency. He always has. 600 years before Jesus came God said these words through the prophet Isaiah - v19.

God's plan has always been a rescue for human beings that destroys human wisdom and self-sufficiency. And that is exactly what the cross does. It seems the Corinthians were desperate to get the clever people, the people who mattered interested in what they had to say.

But how does Paul respond? Look at v20.

Where is the wise man?
Where is the scholar?
Where is the philosopher of this age?
Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

Corinthians why are you so desperate to change the message to get these people in?

When you, Corinthian Christians have already got what all these "wise people" haven't got.

Look at v21. When human beings relied on their own cleverness to work things out what was the result? *They did not know God.*

All those clever people in Corinth. They were so highly educated, they were so smart. And did they know God? No they didn't.

You see this foolish, stupid, crazy message of the cross did the one thing that all the brilliance of the clever people in Corinth couldn't do. V21 there – it saved people.

There are almost certainly people in your office, or your school, or on your ward or in your university department who think that believing in the Bible and God and Jesus Christ is outdated and not credible. And who think that they have much more sophisticated ideas about life. They may well be people who are cleverer than you. Or higher up the career ladder than

you. Or better paid than you. They may have lots of letters after their names.

But if you are a Christian here this morning then through the cross you have already got something they haven't. The most precious thing of all – salvation.

God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.

The cross saves people. Everything else, v18, is just a distraction while you're dying. But the message of the cross is the power of God to save people.

The trouble is it doesn't **appeal**...

It didn't appeal, v22, to Jews. The Jews had their own well boxed off idea of what the Messiah, their rescuer, would be like. He would be a conquering king, a war hero who arrived on Jerusalem on a war horse. They could not get their heads around a Messiah who arrived on a donkey, had a crown of thorns and a cross for a throne.

And the message of the cross didn't appeal to the Greeks either (Greeks here is Paul's way of referring to everybody who is not a Jew). The Greeks wanted to reason their way to God. And they just could not get their heads around the idea of God being caught by his enemies, tried and killed. It was foolishness, you could translate that word "madness."

And throughout human history people have used exactly the same two techniques to box God off.

- Some people like the Jews, want God to be a genie performing miracles on command.
- Others, like the Greeks, want a God made in our image of what we think it is reasonable for God to be like.

I'm sure you have friends in both of those categories.

You know the people who say well if God did a miracle in front of my eyes then I'd believe...

...Or the people who say "well I like to think of God like this..."

Well the cross confounds both those wrong ideas.

The cross is not what people expect God to do. People do not expect the way to know God being putting your trust in the self-sacrificing, sin-bearing death of Jesus Christ, God's Son. The cross is not what people expect God to do.

So if you are going to put your trust in the cross you have to trust God not your own expectations. And trusting God, not your own expectations is the very essence of repentance isn't it?

The very method God has chosen to save people pushes us to deny our own abilities to work things out and forces us to trust God's way.

Which is exactly what we need to do to be rescued from the self-centred, god rejecting, me in the middle way of thinking that is the essence of our sin.

What that means for us that that the fact that the message of the cross doesn't seem to be appealing to lots of people should not put us off. Because that's the way God designed it.

Think of it like this. What kind of religion would really appeal to sinful people like me, like you and like your friends?

Well it would have to be a religion, a way of salvation, that enabled us to retain our pride wouldn't it? That's why people love religions that tell us that we can do good works to earn ourselves a relationship with God so much. Because that is a very flattering message isn't it? We can be good enough for God if only we work hard enough. If only we say enough Our Father, if only we go on pilgrimage to Mecca and give alms, if only we meditate so as to reach a state of transcendence, if only we are a nice person who does our bit and doesn't hurt people.

Well the message of the cross destroys all of those lies. The cross says that you **cannot** be good enough for God. And by nature we find that tough for exactly the same reason that the people in Corinth did. Because in our pride we do not like the idea that God has done things his way without our help.

The part of the gospel the Corinthians most disliked – the cross, where God looked weak and foolish, is, according to Paul, wiser than man's wisdom and stronger than man's strength.

Because the cross did what man's wisdom could never do – it dealt with the fact that God is angry at our sin and must punish it. The cross brought salvation, so that men, women and children could have a relationship with God, so that he would not have to destroy us in his justice.

And what that means for us is that we do not need to change our message to make it more appealing to people.

With a new academic year coming up how is Christ Church going to see the power of God released into Liverpool City Centre?

- By redesigning the web-site?
- By having a great new student pack?
- By making better use of multimedia in our meetings?
- By giving away even more food?
- By being incredibly friendly and welcoming?

Well all of those things are good things to do aren't they? But here in 1 Corinthians God says that his power is the message of the cross.

How are we going to release the power of God into the lives of our friends and people who walk through the doors of our various meetings?

We're going to explain the cross to them.
Because the message of the cross is where the power is. God's power is in a foolish cross.

2 God's power is seen in a foolish church (1:26-31)

The second problem that it seems the Corinthian Christians had with what Paul had done was that they were less than impressed with the church he had founded.

As far as they were concerned, it contained far too many poor, weak and insignificant people. How were they going to get the right sort of people in?

- The young consultant.
- The QC.
- The Head Teacher.
- The students who get 1sts.

As far as the Corinthians were concerned the fact that, v26, not many of them were wise, not many of them were influential and not many of them were from the upper classes, demonstrated the inadequacy of Paul's message.

After all what sort of a God is it who only wants ordinary people to follow him?

Well Paul says. If this church is not good enough for you, Corinthians, why don't you take that up with God – because he chose this church, v27.

And why did he choose these people?
Why did God choose the weak and the stupid and the nobodies?

He did it, v27 to shame the wise, to shame the strong, the nullify, v28, the things that are.

Think about it for a minute. What would a Christianity be like that was only for clever people? Let's say that you had to have an IQ over 120 to be a Christian. Or a degree. Or an income of over £30,000 a year – like a gold card. What would that be like?

Wouldn't it be just unbearably arrogant?

If Christianity was set up so that only the clever people could work it out and join the club churches would be the most unsufferably self-centred, smug, arrogant gatherings of people you could possibly imagine.

Have you ever wondered why is it that throughout most of history, in most of the world, most Christians have been poor?

Well Paul tells us here it is because God wants to shame and humble the rich and arrogant.

God wants to show that people are **not** saved because they are clever enough to work it out. They are rescued because God chooses them.

And he does it, v29, so that no-one may boast before him. You see on the last day, when Jesus comes back, none of us will stand before God's throne because they were clever enough to work it out. We will all be there only because he chose us.

The church in Corinth was mostly composed of people who, frankly, had never worked anything out in their entire lives. And that demonstrated the power of the cross.

And that means we must never, ever be dissatisfied with the make up of the church. We must not despise God's people for their background or intellect or lack of it – God chose them. And he didn't choose any of us because we were clever or smart or beautiful or interesting. He has chosen so it will be clear to the whole world that people do not save themselves but are saved by Christ – v30, who alone brings righteousness, holiness and redemption. God did what he did to destroy forever the illusion that we can bring something to God.

So we shouldn't be surprised if, as we run Christianity Explored and try in all we do as a local church to explain the gospel to people if the people that get converted are not the trendy people, the leaders and the movers and shakers.

Don't be afraid that God will fill the churches with those who are less gifted, less wealthy, or less able.

God's power is seen in the weakness of his people.

That was a lesson that the Corinthians needed to learn and that we, in an age obsessed by image, desperately need to hear as well.

3 God's power is seen in a foolish preacher (2:1-5)

The Corinthians felt Paul's message was weak, they felt the church he had founded didn't have enough important people in it and it seems that they weren't that pleased with Paul as a preacher either.

From the mentions he gets it seems the Corinthian Christians may have preferred the more polished Greek speech of Apollos, Paul's colleague who came to Corinth after Paul had left.

But for Paul his weakness was a good thing.

The Greeks loved eloquence in a way we find it hard to imagine. Debating was one of their national sports. And Paul knew he was not an impressive speaker by the standards of the day. He just didn't measure up. The one thing the Corinthians really wanted him to be – eloquent – he wasn't.

But Paul was **pleased** about that – (v4) – *my message and my preaching were **not** with wise and persuasive words.*

But they did have something else – a demonstration of the Spirit's power. This "demonstration of the Spirit's power" isn't anything to do with signs and wonders and healings.

No. The demonstration of the Spirit's power is the Corinthians – the Spirit's power is seen in the very fact that they were converted.

The very existence of a church in Corinth was a demonstration of the Spirit's power.

And that fact that Paul's preaching wasn't "impressive" was not a bad thing – it was good for the Corinthian Christians.

V5. Paul's naturally weak style meant that the Corinthians could be confident that they hadn't been persuaded to believe by a clever speaker who had all the right tricks and could manipulate them.

They could be confident that God had taken a weak and improbable message, in ordinary people, delivered by a stumbling and ineloquent speaker and had worked, by His Spirit, the power of the message of the cross in their lives and brought them to believe.

Of course this doesn't mean Christians should be anti-intellectual. Paul isn't saying here that he was useless – after all anyone who could write the book of Romans clearly isn't a divvy!

And none of it is to say we shouldn't witness to the rich, powerful and successful – the SU president and the Chief Executive of your company need Christ as much as anybody else.

And none of it is to say that our preaching should be dull, lifeless or ignorant.

But it is to say that the power of God doesn't lie in any aspect of our impressiveness as individuals or as a church.

The power of God is in the message of the cross.

And the apparent weakness of the message, the weakness of the church and the unimpressiveness of God's messengers does not undermine God's power – it ensures that all the glory is his.

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