

READING: I Corinthians 1.18-25

A reading from the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians.

The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written,

'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.'

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

GOSPEL: John 2.13-22

Praise to you, O Christ, King of eternal glory.

The Lord is a great God,

O that today you would listen to his voice.

Harden not your hearts.

Praise to you, O Christ, King of eternal glory.

Hear the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to John.

Glory to you, O Lord.

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, 'Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a market-place!' His disciples remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for your house will consume me.' The Jews then said to him, 'What sign can you show us for doing this?' Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' They then said, 'This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?' But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

This is the gospel of the Lord. **Praise to you, O Christ.**

Year B

Third of Lent

I Corinthians 1.18-25

John 2.13-22

Two particularly striking passages for today ... Paul trying to confuse us all with the 'foolishness' of the Cross and Jesus not acting as Jesus 'meek and mild' but rather as Mr Angry – apparently - overturning the Temple tables!

Both passages ought to bring us up short and make us think ... about what we *really* think about God and what the New Testament is trying to tell us about God.

Many people inside and – indeed – outside the Church wish that God would make it clear what he wants. The discipleship journey would be so much simpler and easier if he did. Paul reminds us that the Jews wanted a sign and the Greeks wanted wisdom but that the cross is God's wisdom, a wisdom which on the face of it appears foolishness to the world. Let's face it a blood-stained instrument of torture and degradation hardly seems a strong selling point! It doesn't look like a source of wisdom but, rather, an emblem of failure. It is particularly important to think on these things as we journey towards Good Friday in this season of Lent.

Our preference is generally to sanitise the cross ... to wear it as jewellery... rather than a badge of suffering. The closest we get to the real cross is to wear it in ash at the beginning of Lent for a few hours – raising eyebrows as we walk down the High Road or order Coffee in Wetherspoons – raising eyebrows rather than changing lives. Although wearing our cross in whatever form does sometimes provide us with a 'way in' to talk about our faith.

Although our frustration with the Cross – if that's the right way of putting it – is perfectly understandable and reasonable, we should not expect God to work to our categories or be more palatable. Many people would like a rational 'clean and clear' explanation of the cross or scientific proof of the Resurrection. It is frustrating at times when we are called to share Good News without convincing evidence that it is good!

However, God does not appear to be interested in impressing us. The Cross looks bad: it IS foolishness, it IS suffering, it IS cruel and it is not easily explained or defended but as one writer, Robert Fyall, once put it,

‘Where there is no defence there is no barrier and where there is no barrier there is the possibility of reality and even intimacy.’

A crucified God is the only God who can stoop so low as to reclaim and heal everything about our humanity ... a God who can be at ease with the worst about us ... a God for whom nothing is irredeemable.

So, what about ‘Mr Angry?’ in the Temple?

In John’s Gospel Jesus cleanses the Temple at the beginning of his public ministry, right after making the water into wine at Cana of Galilee. His disciples, having seen his wonderworking are now trying to understand who he is.

Jesus is declaring himself as a prophet but also claiming the Temple as his ‘Father’s’ house. This must have infuriated many of those who heard it first or second hand. Even to his supporters this must have seemed outrageous and incomprehensible. By the time John’s Gospel actually came to written, the Temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed and Jesus was raised from the dead, so John is making a clear connection between the defunct Temple and the living Jesus ... This isn’t about a building any more but a person ... a spiritual Temple.

The Gospel reading for today has many layers of meaning and with St John’s Gospel, anyway, things are never quite as they seem. St John, writing a few decades after Mark – the earliest of the Gospels – is indulging in much more theological reflection (that is to say, answering the question ‘where is God in all of this?’). John is standing back from the original events themselves and asking ‘What do they mean?’

So, what of this for us now?

Well, on the face of it, we are reminded that a place dedicated to God (Temple, Church etc) is, first and foremost to be a place of encounter, a place of prayer, not a market place. A spacious place where all can meet the living Christ, all can find welcome and peace, as well as challenge, but not a place so busy that prayer is pushed out.

Many of our Churches are busy places but not always prayerful places. People might be praying fervently in them, using lots of words to explain to God what he should be doing, that he should be fitting in with their plans or persuading him to do the things they know will get the world’s attention!

We need to be careful that our buildings and our praying (wherever we do it) is focussed Godward rather than earthward. Yes, we need to do practical things like making ends meet so we can help folk meet God here, but if our plans and activities and strategies get in the way well you get the picture. (Just as an aside that is why I am always trying to empty this Church of stuff rather than fill it up

because an empty building is a spacious building, not one full of distractions and preoccupations – needless to say I don't always succeed and often break my own rules but that remains the aim at least.

More importantly – and linking in with the first reading – the Gospel reminds us that God does not see as we do. How do we know that a big busy Church is any better than an empty one? Just because it has the outward marks of success does not make it a Godly place of encounter. Just because it attracts *us* does not mean it attracts God. The Cross is 'foolishness' to those preoccupied with success and strategies and afraid to fail, or to those who want to look successful or slick in the eyes of the world.

Jesus said 'Go out and baptise in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit 'and build the Church and he promised that he would be alongside those who did that but he never guaranteed success as the world understands it and it is a big question whether or not he wanted us to build an institution rather than a movement but that's a question for another day.

I am heartened and encouraged almost every Sunday when I see folk of all ages gather here in decent numbers seeking to put together worship worthy of God but our success is tested to the extent that we then go 'out there' and put our Christian principles into practice for we must not forget that although we love this Church building and are blessed by it (even with the flickering lights) *Jesus* is our true temple, *God* is the source of our life and hope and *the Cross* is the lever that has secured our salvation, our being set free from sin and death. All of that is not only in here, in our building, but also out there. We are living stones and what feeds and steadies and strengthens us in here – Bible and sacraments and fellowship together equips us for life out there. Our key Christian relationship is with a person, not a building, with Jesus, who is alive, not dead and mediated to us both in Scripture, in the foolishness of the Cross, but also, crucially, now, today and tomorrow in Holy Spirit – praying and acting in us and through us. These are surely the true marks of success.

