

Sermon for Holy Week (Tuesday), Year A: 1 Corinthians 1 & John 12

Preaching Christ crucified: to do so is, I reckon, quite contentious today, and many Christians might wince at the subject. As Christians maybe we reckon we can do Christmas with enthusiasm even in its un-sanitised version. At a push we might be able cope with Jesus washing feet, perhaps even imitate and follow his example but washing each other's...But "Christ crucified" is not the most immediately appealing aspect to us to market Christianity.

I can understand and share the unease that can arise when Christ crucified is proclaimed. I have, myself, encountered some fairly toxic preaching which has used that phrase "Christ crucified" and the cross generally as a means to perpetuate ideas that are deeply damaging - socially, psychologically - and also a distortion of the Gospel.

In my own faltering attempt at articulating why Christ Crucified should still stand at the centre of our faith, I'd like to sketch out some ways in which Christians and non-Christians alike have sometimes sought to rehabilitate Christianity. If any of this hits home, thank Paul HSSERT whose work has enriched my faith; if it's gibberish, blame me.

How do people make sense of Jesus, today, especially a Jesus who was executed?

One way goes something like this:

"Jesus had a good, even a great moral code and message. He did great good in the world and showed people how to be kind. His was a significant development in human ethics. But his moral teaching upset some particularly bad, power hungry and narrow-minded men. He threatened their monopoly on power and moral policing. He threatened to usurp them. Things got out of hand, some people's courage failed, and Jesus was tragically killed. And yet his teaching lives on, and it can help us make sense of life and be kinder, even if it didn't work out in the end for Jesus. His death at least wasn't in vein because it showed great courage which we can emulate."

It's what we could call "The Meaningful Jesus"

There's some truth in that. But I don't think it's what Paul means by preaching "Christ crucified". For Paul, and the Gospel writers, Jesus crucifixion is not an unhappy coda to an otherwise heroic or beautiful life.

Another version might go like this, and is maybe more typically found in more overtly religious and serious, professing Christians:

"Jesus, through all his teaching and actions, showed us just how far we fall from God's moral standard. Jesus showed the world how sinful it is and how powerless we are to change. He acted with great power and did great good, yet the powers of evil tried to overcome him. He was killed but he is stronger than death.

Like a Phoenix from the ashes, he rose again, the great conqueror. All must now bow to his powerful majesty and seek mercy before his great and terrible day of judgement.”

It is what we could call “The Superhero Jesus”.

Again, there more than a few grains of truth here. But, I believe, it is still not quite what I think Paul understood and meant by “Christ Crucified”.

There was a song I learned some years ago at a holiday bible club that went “Jesus is greater than the greatest hero”. And there has been many a time I’ve head Jesus likened to and then as the better of any Marvel comic book superhero.

But Paul doesn’t preach either a “meaningful” Jesus nor a “powerful” Jesus. I don’t believe Paul proclaimed a superhero Jesus nor Jesus the sage.

Look at the structure of the Gospels too, as well as their content.

One has to do some serious editing, some glossing, and restructuring to arrive at either a meaningful, moral teacher with a tragic ending; or at Jesus the superhero for whom the cross was a detour, the means of demonstrating his superhero credentials.

What we have instead in the Gospels AND in Paul’s letter is something that confounded two tendencies, two outlooks, those which Paul labels “the Jews” and “the Greeks”.

These are not simply historically identifiable, ethnic groups; Jews and Greeks here in 1 Corinthians stand for two religious outlooks:

- **The quest for sign and power**
- **and the quest for wisdom and understanding**

An outlook orientated towards desire for spectacular intervention;
and an outlook desiring sage explanation.

The Jews, of course, does not mean all Jews then or now;
likewise, “the Greeks” doesn’t just means Plato and his buddies.

In fact these two outlooks didn’t die out when the temple was destroyed or when the Greek philosophers became simply figures of history.

Today, the popular understanding of God as the one who intervenes with signs of power, and the popular understanding of God as the one who provides ratification for our rational understanding: these still persist.

And Christ crucified stands against them both.

Returning to the 1st century: to be a Messiah, in the popular understanding of the day, went hand-in-hand with signs and power. The power to bring in the kingdom of justice and expel the pagans. The power to bring God's reign to bear. If the claim to Messiahship was to be validated, many thought, signs of divine power were required.

And so some assumed Jesus' miracles were simply that: power breaking in, ever more strongly, until the reign of God would come in its full power and overwhelming spectacle. It's why some religious leaders wanted signs, to witness with their own eyes, before they'd validate Jesus' claims. (The irony, of course, is that when there were signs, they weren't the right kind because they didn't sit neatly with the way things should be.)

Let's consider for a moment our Gospel reading too.

We're told that some Greeks came to request an audience with Jesus, via his disciples. Jesus' response?

Well, it look like a bizarre non-sequitur!

“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”

It might sound maybe like an esoteric riddle, the kind of thing a philosopher might throw out, but it's hardly worldly wisdom: “I will be glorified by hanging on the tree of shame.”

And Jesus continues:

“Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”

How can this be? How can judgment come and a ruler be driven out by Jesus going to a shameful execution outside the city, in a rubbish dump?

How does this work? how does this make any sense?

The only answer I have is that it doesn't work in the way that things get done in our world, in our human framework. And it doesn't make sense in terms of the wisdom of the sage, the philosopher.

Nietzsche, the infamous philosopher, saw the foolishness of Christ crucified -

a weak God who is shamed and killed - and rejects it. “Why love and dedicate ones life to a god like that?!?” Nietzsche chose instead the will to power: achievement, ambition, striving to reach the highest possible position in life. There was a certain intellectual consistency to him: he saw the implications of Christ crucified.

To be possessed by the Spirit of this Christ would mean abandon the quest to “get things done”, to become great, to re-make the world through power and ingenuity. He kind of got it; and he didn't like it. But Christ crucified effects something in the world, in us, despite the world, despite ourselves.

It did something to Saul the righteous persecutor.

Knowing what we know of the rest of Paul's life, we know that he experienced a profound conversion of heart as well as mind. His conversion meant unlearning and letting go of so much he was certain of: certainty that he was right and the followers of Christ were heretics. He was not transformed by **power**, as he had been raised and formed to understand power; nor by the **wisdom** he was schooled in by his teachers, whether Jewish or Greek.

This brings me to faith: a word I feel a little wary of using, because, again, there are popular understandings of **faith** which are not what Paul nor the Gospel writers mean by the word.

Faith, as we often hear the word used, as we may have used it ourselves, often means something like:

an internal ability to see the signs of God's power breaking in, intervening in the world, spot them when other more cynical folk overlook them or chose to disbelieve;
maybe even the ability to channel that intervention supernaturally (think of faith healers);
and then in the intervals between those interventions, this faith keeps going, staying positive, seeking more signs of power.

or it can be something like this:

an internal ability to discern order and sense a bigger plan, the broader picture, the order in the apparel chaos,
an ability to achieve an inner calm whatever the circumstances;

But with either kind of “faith”, there is no Christ. No relation to Christ. Or at best, Christ becomes our ultimate example of what faith looks like and what faith can achieve.

It is shame we don't have better grammar in English. Because “faith” when turned into a verb becomes “believing” which itself does violence to the NT use of it. Because believing can simply mean “knowing something without quite being certain; knowing something is probably the case.”

It's a shame we can't speak of "faithing" or being "faithers"

Because to "To Faith" Christ crucified, to be "faithers" of this, is not to believe something that is probably true, something that's a bit tricky but we reckon probably makes sense, all things considered, like the way I believe electricity will make my light work. It's happened in the past, I don't quite get how electrons work, but I believe it'll happen again. Faith in Christ isn't like that but to much greater degree.

No. Faith in Christ is to cling to, to attach ourselves to Christ crucified. To die with him to ourselves so he will live his life in us. It is kind of abandonment.

This faith doesn't get things done or make for a compelling, attractive programme for life: either for high achievers or deep thinkers.

It does do something though: it unmask and exposes all our power and wisdom as being rooted in violence, in victimising, in progressing the human race at the expense of those who can't keep up; it exposes our wisdom and power as being the kind of things that would crucify Christ over again if it help us get things done, helped us keep things going, maintain order.

The Gospel is strange. It is foolish. It doesn't "get things done" and it doesn't "make sense of everything" in the way we might like.

But it works on us at a deep level and we find ourselves coming to think differently. The work happens very gradually. The "foolishness" of the gospel does not overwhelm by power. It inducts us into another way of being without shaming us or forcing us into submission. It creeps up on us and changes us from within, however intellectual or not we feel we are.

Rather than *overwhelming* the world and its powers by force, or spectacle, or rhetoric, Jesus *exposes* the world and its powers. The powers, whether Gentile or Jewish, thought they we are doing the right or at least the best thing in the circumstances.

But Jesus calls time on all attempts to justify killing as a necessary evil; he exposes all attempts at using expulsion to shore up unity and all attempts at judgement to bring about peace.

He shows us what we are and what we do and then we returns not to shame us but to forgive. He then asks us to live out this same pattern with our friends, family, our enemies.

It does sound like foolishness and it's not the world's wisdom. It doesn't need to be declared and expounded by the most intelligent; in fact, this Gospel is not a product of the intellect at all. But as we hear it over and over again, Sunday after Sunday, day after day, many of us will - do - find ourselves changing and strangely, **coming to faith.**

What Jesus promised came to pass: as he was lifted up on the cross, he drew humanity to himself. The victim became a revelation; by his willingness to endure the cross, he has undone Sin, cast out the Accuser, and drawn us from death into life. Thanks be to God.