

1 Corinthians 1:18-25
(Isaiah 29:13-14; Luke 10:21-24)
“We Preach Christ Crucified”

Introduction

A well-used weapon in the defense of the Christian faith through debate, that is, through what is called Christian apologetics, is the kind of argument that attempts to show the reasonableness of the gospel through natural theology or through philosophical argument. I am not for a moment mocking such attempts and was, in my student days, often helped by such gifted thinkers. That said, the apostle Paul usually took a very different tack, as we see in our text: Paul here begins a threefold critique of the spiritual pride that lies at the heart of the problems in Corinth. The Corinthians have misunderstood the gospel and broken into quarreling, divisive factions, because of their pride in what they consider their spiritual gifts and their wisdom, the Greek word for wisdom being *sophia*, from which we derive the word *philosophy* (love of wisdom).

In the verses before us this morning, Paul argues that, far from seeming like wisdom, the gospel seems foolish to the surrounding world, first because of the heart of the gospel: the message of the cross. He then goes on to argue in the final verses of chapter one, that not only does the message of the cross seem foolish to the world, but those who believe the message seem foolish as well. He reminds the Corinthians that they are not nearly as impressive to the world around them as they may think. Finally, in the opening verses of chapter two, Paul confesses that the gospel also seems foolish to the world because of its messengers, people like Paul and Apollos and Cephas, whom the Corinthians are bragging about following.

This morning, we will look at the first of these: the apparent folly of the message of the gospel, what Paul calls, “the word of the cross.” He begins with these words: “For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1:18). He then sharpens the contrast a few verses later by contrasting human wisdom with what seems to be the foolishness of God, and human strength with what seems to be the weakness of God. This morning, we will ask two questions of the text: Why is the word of the cross folly to those who are perishing? And, why is the word of the cross God’s power to us who are being saved?

My thinking about this familiar text has been sharpened and enriched by a short, eight-and-a-half minute YouTube video by Bishop Robert Barron entitled, “ISIS and the Cross.” I strongly commend it to you, as it not only eloquently summarizes the what Paul is getting at here, but it shows the continuing relevance, even the crucial importance, of Christians still holding up what Barron calls “the taunt of the cross” to the wisdom and power of an unbelieving and hostile world.

Body

1. Why is the word of the cross folly to those who are perishing?

It is foolishness to those who pride themselves in their wisdom.

Even though Rome conquered the Greeks militarily, Greek philosophy, drama, art and architecture, effectively conquered Roman culture, and set the standard for wisdom and beauty throughout the Roman Empire. A key element of philosophy derived from Plato was that true knowledge was only of eternal things, the *logoi*, which could mean “the words,” referring to the ideal forms or rational thoughts, of which the things we experience are but imperfect passing shadows.

Thus Paul calls the gospel “the *logos* of the cross.” He is saying, I think, that the eternal word, the great truth that explains all else is not something that can be discovered by mere rational thought and discourse. It must rather be revealed, and when it is revealed, it appears foolish to those who can only see, as it were, from below.

And, of course, the reason the word of the cross seemed so foolish to the wise of the world was that the cross was nothing less than an instrument of state-sponsored terror, a horrible means of keeping conquered people submissive to Roman rule. No one wanted to be nailed to a cross or to the wall of city, there to die in excruciating agony (*ex crucis* – “from the cross”). The disciples loved Jesus and meant it when they promised that they would never leave him, but faced with the terror of the cross, they all fled – except for the disciple John and the women. Nothing more horrible could be conceived than to end up crucified. So to say that you preached one thing, a crucified Messiah, was the epitome of foolishness to the ancient world. It seemed a horrible joke, in extremely bad taste.

It is weakness to those who pride themselves in their strength.

If Greek thought and aesthetics conquered Rome, Roman military might was the epitome of power, and the conquered nations, including the Jews, longed for a Messiah even stronger than Rome who would overthrow the Empire and free Israel once again to place on the throne of David one worthy to bear the name, Son of David. This was the kind of Messiah they sought. Over and over again throughout Jesus’ public ministry, the people and their leaders asked him, “What sign do show us?” In other words, what miraculous evidence can you present that will convince us that the very power of God is at work in you, power greater than that of Rome, power able to set us free and restore our former glory?

And what is Paul's response to such questions? "For Jews seek signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles" (1:22-23). Of course it was a stumbling block and folly to those still looking at things from the world's perspective! What could be more hopelessly weak than a person nailed to a cross? What could be more foolish than placing one's hope in a crucified Messiah? What could be a greater spiritual disaster than worshiping someone humiliated, mocked and killed by the power of the world?

2. So why is the word of the cross God's power to us who are being saved?

The cross supremely reveals God's wisdom by humbling the pride that is the root of our rebellion against God.

First of all, it is the power of God precisely because it strikes at the root of our pride that alienates us from God and seeks to demand that God act in a way that comports with our sense of wisdom and power, in a way that makes sense to our natural wisdom and that leaves us with our dignity intact.

The apostle John's vision of God's throne room in the book of Revelation makes this point poignantly: John sees in the right hand of God a scroll sealed with seven seals, and John weeps that no one is found worthy to break the seals and open the scroll in order to explain and do God's will. But then he is told, "Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals." Here is a gospel worth believing: a conquering Lion King more powerful even than the might of Rome. But when John looks to see the mighty, conquering Lion, he writes, "I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain" (Revelation 5:6-6).

To those who are being saved, a door into heaven has been opened, and we have seen that the most powerful thing in heaven and earth is self-sacrificial love. And only God is strong enough to be that weak, only God is wise enough to be that foolish.

And the cross supremely reveals God's power by destroying sin and death through self-sacrificial love.

But there is another aspect to this that makes sense of it all to those with eyes to see, ears to hear, hearts to receive: Though the power of this world crucified Jesus, the power of God raised him from the dead. You might wonder why Paul doesn't make that point here in these verses. But remember that Paul wrote this letter intending that it first be read at one sitting. He begins the letter with the cross, but ends it with the resurrection:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church (15:3-9).

What would cause a first century Rabbi who had once been an enemy of the church, persecuting it and trying to destroy it, to become its greatest champion and to say, "We preach Christ crucified"? Only one thing: he knew that the one who was crucified in weakness was raised in the power of new life. One of my favorite moments in Robert Barron's video, "ISIS and the Cross," is when Bishop Barron says, "'Oh the cross is a symbol, a metaphor.' Give me a break! That's faculty lounge talk." A symbol or metaphor would do nothing for Paul against the awful reality of the cross. Only the power of the resurrection trumps the power of the cross. It is the only thing that explains the transformation within a few short days of the terrified disciples who had fled Jesus into the mighty band of apostles who turned the world upside down.

Because, as Barron says, holding up a crucified Messiah as our Savior and Lord, making the cross, a symbol of this world's might into a symbol of our victory in Christ over the forces of this world, is to make the cross a taunt to the wisdom and power of the world. In holding up the cross, we say, "Is this the best you can do? You cannot terrify us any longer, because the cross has been conquered in the resurrection, and death has been swallowed up in Christ's victory."

Conclusion

Paul wrote to the church in Rome, the capitol of that ruthless empire, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Romans 1:16).

Never be ashamed of the word of the cross. Although the world still scorns it and considers it weak and foolish, for us it is the symbol of Christ's victory over everything that would separate us from God. "For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men" (1:25).