

Sermon The Cross Lent 3, 08.03.15 HURC
Psalm 19 I Corinthians 1:18-31 Julian Templeton

The Apostle Paul writes to the new Christians at Corinth about the message of the cross. He feels compelled to write about the meaning of the cross because some of the Corinthian Christians had aligned themselves with particular leaders in such a way that they were dividing the church into factions. Some aligned themselves with Paul, some with Apollos, and some with Cephas (see I Cor. 1:10-12). Each faction claimed that *his or her leader* was the wisest and most powerful (see 3:3-4). But Paul challenges the basis of these rival claims by arguing that the message of the cross is not one of worldly wisdom and power but of divine foolishness and weakness. He writes,

...the message of the cross is foolishness to those on their way to destruction, but to we who are being saved it is the power of God. (1:18)

The message of the cross is a paradox. Jesus died a criminal's death by crucifixion, yet God used this voluntary act of self-sacrifice to bring salvation to those who trust in Jesus. Jesus's self-sacrifice, his giving up of his right to life by dying on the cross, becomes the way to life and salvation not only for Jesus but also for all who trust in Jesus. The English word 'sacrifice', to give up or to offer something, derives from the Latin *sacrificium*, meaning: 'to make holy'. Jesus's life was a holy or sanctified life because he recognised it as a gift from God and in response offered his life in the service of God, culminating in giving up his life to die on the cross. This act of self-sacrifice seems to be weak and foolish but God used it to reveal his power and wisdom. What seems to be just one more

meaningless human death is used by God to enact purposeful divine salvation. Salvation has been described as the experience of:

...being saved from cramped little lives of selfishness and saved for the broad, roomy, loving discipleship of the cross.¹

One of the central paradoxes of the Christian Faith is the claim that we come to experience true life only through first identifying ourselves with Christ's death. When we loosen our vice-like grip on self, we discover a life worth living. The heart of the paradox is this: a life centered on yourself and your own concerns and interests is a spiritually dead life. By contrast, a life centered on Jesus involves dying to your self-centeredness and coming alive to God and to your neighbour. This is an expansive and holistic life.

Arguably many of the most intractable problems facing the world currently—climate change, war, discrimination, persecution—are really personal problems writ large. They are all the unintended consequences of persons being unable to change self-interested attitudes and behaviour. We generally protect our vested interest regardless of the consequences on others. This is life lived as a struggle to compete for scarce resources. I will grab more for me and therefore there is less for you. Yet this behaviour ultimately leads to 'cramped little lives of selfishness' whether that life is lived in cardboard box under a bridge or in a palace.

¹ Jeff Paschal, 'Homiletical Perspective', 89 in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 2, Ed's D Bartlett and B Brown Taylor, (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press)

What we need is something radical able to transform self-interest into generosity. What we need is to change the hands clenched in fear into open hands able to give and receive. Where can such practical wisdom and intelligence be found? Paul quotes from the Prophet Isaiah: (29:14)

I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate. (1:19)

Paul claims that the message of the cross that he preached has the effect of humbling all human claims to being wise. It does this because it is the wisdom of the crucified Christ, which seems to the world to be utterly foolish and scandalous. The world loves winners and achievers, therefore a man who dies a criminal's death is regarded neither as a winner nor an achiever but as a loser; and as a loser, he attracts the world's pity and contempt.

This was the way Paul, when he was Saul, used to regard Jesus and Christians. But that was before the risen Jesus encountered Saul. After this encounter, Saul changed his name to Paul and became a Christian and eventually became an apostle to the Gentiles, planting churches at Corinth and other places. And Paul planted churches first of all by preaching the gospel message and forming a church from those who responded with faith. What was notable about the church at Corinth and all the earliest churches was how they drew people from every strata and station in life. Rich and poor, masters and slaves, males and females, Jews and Gentiles; people from all categories were drawn to the message of the gospel and formed the first churches. Outside the church rich and poor, masters and slaves, males and females, Jews and Gentiles only related to one another according to strict hierarchical social convention, and not at all on an equal

footing. The Church at Corinth was comprised of a few people from better off circumstances but most from quite humble circumstances.

Brothers and sisters, think of what kind of people you are, whom God has called. Few of you are wise by any human standard, few powerful or of noble birth. Yet God has chosen what the world regards as foolish to shame the wise; God has chosen what the world regards as weak to shame the strong; God has chosen what the world regards as insignificant and despised, mere nothings, to overthrow the existing order. Therefore there can be no more boasting before God about human capacities. It is because of what God has done for you that you are in Christ Jesus. God has made him our wisdom and righteousness and holiness and redemption. (1 Cor. 1:26-30)

If humans are to live reconciled community then something other than power or status or intelligence has to be found as a basis of that reconciled community. At Corinth it was Paul's preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ centred on the cross that drew a diverse group of people together into a church.

We preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews, foolishness to Gentiles. But to we who are called, both Jews and Gentiles, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength. (1 Cor. 1:23-25)

One way of thinking about the challenges of human differences is that they constitute horizontal parallel lines that seldom meet or when they do meet they clash. Think of the rich as

one line, the poor as another; or think of different cultures running in parallel; or people who hold different political views, say, on the right or on the left, existing in mutual suspicion. How might these deep differences between people be acknowledged but also brought into conversation in such a way that they can be reconciled?

(Refer to the Cross Sculpture in the Chapel)

The Cross is formed from two beams: one horizontal, one vertical. Let us imagine that the horizontal beam represents all created reality, including human reality; and the vertical beam represents God's reality. The gospel message centres on the cross because it makes the claim that Jesus Christ voluntarily took upon himself the whole weight of human sin. In his arms that were horizontally outstretched, in the open hands nailed to the cross, Jesus Christ took upon himself the sin that keeps people divided and estranged from one another. As Paul argues in the Letter to the Colossians, 'God has cancelled the bond of sin, setting it aside by nailing to the cross' (see Col. 2:14).

Since the horizontal parallel lines of our humanity will not meet or converge by themselves, something radical is needed to connect them. God takes the initiative by using Christ's self-sacrifice to intervene vertically from above. In Christ's person and action on the cross, divine and human, vertical and horizontal, converge, and the obstacle of sin and alienation is overcome. Now in Christ there is a way that rich and poor, powerful and powerless, Gentile and Jew, female and male, can overcome the sin that distorts and divides and live in reconciled unity. For the condition of sin affects all alike, all are equally affected by it. Christ offers his life on the cross in solidarity with all people. He puts an end to arguments and

counter arguments about who is less deserving or more deserving, who is less sinned against or more sinned against. Jesus Christ was the only person who was without sin, yet he took upon himself the burden of sin in solidarity with all humanity and all creation.

The paraphrase of Psalm 19 that we sung earlier contains the line:

Hold back your servant from self-will
and break its power to bind me.²

The most intractable problem of the human predicament is our enslavement to self and self-will and our consequent alienation from one another. Only if the power of this self-inflicted condition can be broken can we really be free.

Christ's voluntary identification with human sin by dying on the cross, followed by his resurrection to new life, breaks the horizontal power of sin by a vertical intervention. God in Christ does what we are often powerless to do for ourselves. Christ submitted his self-will to God 'Yet not my will but yours be done'. In so doing he has opened the way for us to be liberated from the tyranny of self. Christ's open arms and hands symbolise the open-to-God and open-to-one-another state that we share in through trusting in Christ. As we come to share in the Lord's Supper, we come with open and trusting hands, ready to receive that which through the cross gives spiritual life: the bread of life and cup of salvation. And with the same open hands and open arms we bless one another with the 'peace of Christ'. Thanks be to God.

² From the paraphrase 'God's perfect law revives the soul' by IR Pitt-Watson, in *Rejoice and Sing*, 674, © The United Reformed Church, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991