

## POWER AND WISDOM

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Wellsford and Hakaru, Sunday 29 January 2017

[MW17-02]

Now, I'm not wishing to insult you but just ask a question:

- do you consider yourself foolish being here in church this morning?  
[space for reflection/answers]
- because to a disturbingly large number of people we are acting stupidly in gathering here Sunday by Sunday
- probably there are some people you know quite well who even if they do not exactly come out and say it think you are foolish to bother being in church on Sunday morning

Especially when you could rather be ...

- enjoying a leisurely lie-in  
savouring a tasty brunch  
out fishing or golfing or playing bowls  
relaxing at the beach, walking through the bush, reading the Sunday paper ...
- there are many, many things you could be doing on a Sunday morning yet you have chosen to be here ... a choice many regard as foolish

A choice that points to bigger things going on here

- for we have chosen to allow our lives to be directed by God:  
to live and act as if there is a God whose Son was born and lived as one of us;  
who died on the cross, was buried and rose again
- this is seen by many as at best immature, naive, misguided  
and at worst hopelessly foolish

Let me ask you again: do you consider yourself foolish, unwise, being here this morning?

This is precisely the situation Paul is addressing in our first reading

- a situation that existed in his time  
a situation that exists in our time  
when followers of Jesus are written off as of no account

In 1 Corinthians 1:18 Paul writes:

*The message about the cross doesn't make sense to lost people. But for those of us who are being saved, it is God's power at work.*

What looks like foolishness, weakness and of no importance at all

- turns out to be the exact opposite  
Paul highlighted this by writing about Jews and Greeks  
and we can identify similar groups in our world today
- here are some thoughts on what this means for these kinds of people

The thought of a executed carpenter in a remote, troublesome province of the mighty Roman empire being the salvation of the world was simply too much to take. They lived in a culture which exalted the achievements of men. The Olympics stemmed out of their fascination and respect for the physical potential of men. The original athletes competed naked to show off their physical form, and their acts of strength and endurance were the stuff of legend. The Romans celebrated the power of the state to bring peace and a type of unity to so many diverse provinces. They ruled with an iron fist, and their influence did bring peace to the lands they controlled.

The rule of the day was that might was right, and the mightiest ruled over those who were weak. To accept an act of apparent weakness as the saving event of the entire world simply did not mesh with their thinking. Furthermore, Both Romans and Greeks were also famous for the wisdom of their "high thinkers". The writings of Plato, Socrates, Cicero and other Greek and Roman thinkers are still considered to be some of the most intelligent writings by human beings, ever. They knew they were smart, and they made it very well known to all that they considered themselves the wisest race of people in the known world. If anyone was going to save the world, it was them, and the world had better listen.

The Christian preacher with his blunt message seemed a crude and uncultured figure to be laughed at and ridiculed, rather than listened to and respected.

The Jews, on the other hand, knew that salvation would not come from humans, but from God through a promised Messiah. They looked for someone who would shake up the world's way of doing things and take over, establishing Israel at the centre of a world brought under control by the Messiah. The powerful, awe-inspiring words of the prophets who predicted the Messiah were interpreted as a promise of a great, down-right miraculous, military take-over.

The Jews were captives of the Romans, so a military take-over would have to be miraculous - an intervention of God upon the world as it was known at the time. These Jews could not reconcile the work of Jesus on the cross to what they expected of the promised Messiah. No one whose life ended on a cross could possibly be their Saviour. In Jesus they saw one who was meek and lowly, who deliberately avoided the spectacular, who served and who died a lonely death on the cross. It seemed to them an impossible picture of the Chosen One of God.

The crucifixion of Christ therefore offends the sensibilities of both groups, one who sees his work as foolish compared to the wisdom of the world, and the other who sees him as weak compared to the strength of the world.

Against that background, back then, it seemed the Christian message had little chance of success  
- right here and now, it seems the Christian message has little chance of success  
in a world that values looking good, image and sporting prowess  
money, influence, technology and scientific thinking

To which Paul's words ring clearly across the years:

*What looks like God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom;  
and what looks like God's weakness is stronger than human strength.*

Here's how one contemporary preacher puts it:

God works in ways that the world may consider foolish and weak and brings salvation to the whole of mankind! Christ's work on the cross goes straight to the root of the world's real problem, the sinful nature of humans past, present and future. He attacks and defeats the root of what causes the world's trouble, sin, evil, rebellion and deceit, and in doing so, he allowed people to be free of the evil which encumbers them and live under the love, and in the light, of the God who created them. Jesus didn't simply think and write about the solution to our peril, nor did he lead armies to fight a temporary foe, he rescued us by undermining the sin upon which evil is built. The foolishness of God brought sin its death blow, allowing us to be free.

It also led God to use those who the world looks down upon to change the world forever

- Paul highlights and makes much of the fact that the church was for the most part composed of the simplest and humblest folk
- for sure there were noble ladies and some men of high rank including even the cousin of an Emperor

- but the great mass of Christians were 'ordinary people' artisans, labourers, servants and slaves
- in fact Christianity was derided because it appealed to the common people and was something a 'respectable' member of society should have nothing to do with
- in AD178 one Celsus wrote:  
Let no cultured person draw near, none wise, none sensible ...  
[Christians] are wool dressers, cobblers and fullers, the most uneducated and vulgar persons.

What was different, and what was the appeal of Christianity was that it

- made people who were things into real men and women into sons and daughters of God
- giving those who had no respect, self-respect those who had no life, life eternal
- telling people that even though they were worthless in the eyes of the world they mattered intensely to God and in God's eyes were worth the death of his only Son

To these whom the world would write off God says:

- I will use you to achieve my great purposes  
here is a story which portrays how God takes those who are seen as less than significant to do the most significant things imaginable

A water bearer in India had two large pots, each hung on each end of a pole, which he carried across his neck. One of the pots had a crack in it, and while the other pot was perfect and always delivered a full portion of water at the end of the long walk from the stream to the master's house, the cracked pot arrived only half full.

For two years this went on daily, with the bearer delivering only one and a half pots of water to his master's house. Of course, the townspeople laughed every time they saw the old man spilling water all the way home. The perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments, perfect to the end for which it was made. But the poor cracked pot was ashamed of its own imperfection, and miserable that it was able to accomplish only half of what it had been made to do. He felt even worse that the water bearer was mocked due to his inadequacy.

After two years of what it perceived to be a bitter failure, it spoke to the water bearer one day by the stream. "I am ashamed of myself, and I want to apologise to you."

"Why?" asked the bearer. "What are you ashamed of?"

"I have been able, for these past two years, to deliver only half my load because this crack in my side causes water to leak out all the way back to your master's house. Because of my flaws, you have to do all of this work, and you suffer such mockery from the others," the pot said.

The water bearer felt sorry for the old cracked pot, and in his compassion he said, "As we return to the master's house, I want you to notice the beautiful flowers along the path."

Indeed, as they went up the hill, the old cracked pot took notice of the sun warming the beautiful wild flowers on the side of the path, and this cheered it some. But at the end of the trail, it still felt bad because it had leaked out half its load, and so again it apologised to the bearer for its failure.

The bearer said to the pot, "I hear the laughter of the others, but I want you to notice something. Did you notice that there were flowers only on your side of your path, but not on the other pot's side? That's because I have always known about your flaw, and I took advantage of it. I planted flower seeds on your side of the path, and every day while we walk back from the stream, you've watered them. For two years I have been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate my master's table. Without you being just the way you are, he would not have this beauty to grace his house."

Each of us has our own unique flaws. We're all cracked pots. But if we will allow it, the Lord will use our flaws to grace His table. They can appear as foolishness to the rest of the world, but God knows what he's doing.

Those who seek salvation through knowledge and wisdom

- or through great demonstrations of power and strength are bound to be disappointed
- the only way is the way of our Saviour, Jesus Christ who knew exactly what he was doing and why he was doing it

We are here this morning because we have chosen to accept, believe in

- and be obedient to the foolishness of God as we follow, may we never lose sight of the greater wisdom of the cross of Christ
- remember too that those who oppose us those who consider us foolish for being here on Sunday morning who think our faith is weak and ineffectual
- also need to hear the message that we have been given to share so that they too can come to put their trust in the foolishness of God

As the 'take home thought' this week

- I invite you to reflect on that wisdom of the cross of Christ and further, as you take time to reflect make sure you do not shortchange yourself
- for God in his wisdom as chosen you put the wisdom of the world to shame and to bring the strength of the strong to shame

Let's just take a moment to be quiet before God

- and then I'll pray