

## What If? What Is! What Ought To Be

*A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on 23 January 2011, by David Gill. Readings for the third Sunday after the Epiphany were Isaiah 9:1-4, 1 Corinthians 1:10-18, St Matthew 4:12-23.*

It's always interesting to speculate on how different history might look if key individuals, at key moments, had decided other than the way they did. Call it, if you like, the "what if?" game.

For example, what if Napoleon Bonaparte, growing up on the island of Corsica, had decided to join the British navy instead of the French artillery? Or, what if the young seminarian who would later be known as Joseph Stalin had continued studying for the priesthood and had not gone into politics?

What if Hitler, in 1941, had listened to his generals, decided against invading Russia, kept his forces concentrated in the west and succeeded in defeating Britain? What if John F. Kennedy, on that fateful day in 1963, had decided he had too much work to do in Washington and cancelled the trip to Dallas?

You can play the same game with the history of the Church. What if Pope Leo X, in 1517, had said to himself "That young chap Martin Luther is right. The Church does need reforming. I'll bring him to Rome, make him a cardinal and put him in charge of cleaning things up"? Or – here's one for the Anglicans – what if King Henry VIII had said "Marriage is just too complicated, I'm going to stay a bachelor"?

You can do the same thing with the Bible. What if Saul of Tarsus had not been converted on the road to Damascus, if he had remained an ardent persecutor of the Church? What kind of Christianity would have emerged, without the massive input of Paul the apostle?

Or, what if Jesus of Nazareth had handled things differently?

What if he had decided that worldly power was the way to go? It was a serious option, the temptation story suggests, and that, after all, was the sort of Messiah many were hoping for. What if he'd been a better ecumenical diplomat, adept at coping with temperamental religious leaders, good at smoothing ruffled feathers, skilled at doing deals with political authorities?

What if the final clash had been averted, if Jesus had gone on to a ripe old age, his authority recognized by all, until at last, full of honours and acclamation, he retired on the biblical equivalent of a Centrelink pension?

What if there'd been no trial, no cry of utter despair, no execution? What if it had all ended in smiles, not tears? What if he had been – some might say – a little wiser, a bit less foolhardy?

It would have been so much better.

Or would it?

Graham Greene, in his novel "Monsignor Quixote" describes a dream of the old priest.

"He had dreamt that Christ had been saved from the cross by a legion of angels to which on an earlier occasion the Devil had told him he could appeal. So there was no final agony, no heavy stone which had to be rolled away, no discovery of an empty tomb. Father Quixote stood there watching on Golgotha as Christ stepped down from the Cross triumphant and acclaimed. The Roman soldiers, even the Centurion, knelt in His honour, and the people of Jerusalem poured up the hill to worship Him. The disciples clustered happily around. His mother smiled through her tears of joy. There was no ambiguity, no room for doubt and no room for faith at all. The whole world knew with certainty that Christ was the Son of God.

"It was only a dream, of course it was only a dream, but none the less Father Quixote had felt on waking the chill of despair.... He had found himself whispering, "God save me from such a belief."

Well, God has saved us from such a belief. The question “what if” makes for an interesting game, but that’s all it is -- just a game. What matters is not “*what if?*” but “*what is?*”

And *what is*, shockingly, is a crucified God. *What is*, is love. Unconditional, uncalculating, unlimited, unconquerable love. That’s what Christians believe we have glimpsed in the strange man of the cross. Not a brave human being, broken on the wheel of history. Not an idealist, brought down by his own tactical errors. But God, nothing less.

Paul wrote about it to the church in Corinth. We heard his words a few minutes ago. “The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved (or healed, or made whole) it is the power of God” (1 Cor 1:18). Yes, the cross looks like tragedy, folly, defeat. But to those with the eyes to see it is an authentic revelation of the power of God.

Paul had a special reason for writing this way. Christians in Corinth were divided. The church was riven by personalities, power plays, factionalism. Some local leaders were claiming superior wisdom and deeper spiritual insight. Paul responds not by competing with them, or taking sides, and he doesn’t just growl at them. He deals with the problem by recalling them to basics.

Remember the cross, he says, meaning not just a couple of bits of wood but all they represent. Remember, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. Remember, in that self-giving love is wisdom and power, but of a kind that contradicts all striving for personal glory and eminence. Put aside your preconceived ideas about what it means to be wise or powerful or spiritually discerning. Lowliness and love are what matter. For they are the qualities we find at the heart of our crucified God.

Paul sorted out the Corinthians. But personality cults, power plays and factionalism did not, unfortunately, fade forever into history. They still appear, a recurring feature of church life in some congregations, in all denominations, even occasionally in ecumenical organisations where people should know better. Not

surprising, I guess. We're all human. We can all be seduced by power. We're all tempted to use even the Church to prop up our fragile egos.

Not surprising, but deplorable nevertheless. For whenever people use the Church in that way, they turn it into a standing denial of the gospel.

Not that there's anything wrong with differences of opinion. Different opinions make horse races interesting. Different opinions may be the means by which a church seizes new challenges, a congregation generates fresh life. The problems arise when such differences are allowed to fracture the fellowship, when they become ladders on which individuals try to elevate themselves.

Participating in the life of the Church is about serving, not self-promoting. One of the titles of the Pope, which appears under his name in papal encyclicals and other authoritative documents, is "Servus Servorum Dei" ("Servant of the Servants of God"). A wonderful title. Of course, papacies don't always work out that way – popes are human too! – but it's still a wonderful title. It should be built into the job description of everyone called to any kind of role in the life of the church, from archbishops to Sunday School teachers – yes and pastors and general secretaries too! -- and carved into the stonework over every church door.

The cross stands for all time as Christ's "no!" to the love of power, his "yes!" to the power of love.

The power of love: that's *what is* in the heart of God.

The power of love: that's *what ought to be* in the heart of Christ's church, in the heart of this congregation.

The power of love: that's *what ought to be*, in your heart and mine.

God give us grace to make it so.

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