

No Handle on the Cross

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 8 March 2015, by David Gill. Readings for the third Sunday in Lent were Exodus 20:1-17, 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 and St John 2:13-22.

“God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength”.

The church in Corinth was having problems. Its disunity was bad enough. But something even worse was happening. Some in Corinth were laughing at Christians’ convictions, ridiculing what they believed. Faith in Christ was becoming an embarrassment.

The mockers weren’t totally hostile. But they did want some clear, compelling answers. Some were prepared to believe if they could be shown visible evidence, signs and miracles. Others were prepared to believe if they heard compelling arguments that would stack up against the philosophy then in vogue.

Give us what we want, they insisted. Convince us! Remove our doubts! Make things clear! Simplify the business of believing!

It is a craving we still have today.

A few years ago, the magazine of the Uniting Church in Victoria ran a story by one of our ministers, John Williams, describing an encounter he had witnessed between a fundamentalist Christian and an equally rabid atheist. Strangely, the two had much in common. Each was equipped with watertight arguments, proof texts and supporting tracts.

“What shocked (me most),” wrote the author, “was the shared lack of wonder or astonishment. ‘Puzzled about the cosmos and its nature? Let me exorcise that astonishment! I have all the answers – neat, tidy and conclusive answers only a twisted mind or a sinful soul could conceivably reject! Just read my books and you know it all ...’”

There is something very deep in the human psyche, in each of us, that clamours for clarity, that hungers for certainty, that wants to nail the mystery down. Something that itches to possess the divine in manageable form – in the doctrinal statement that says it all, the ethical stance that admits no shades of grey, the moral code that has no ifs buts or maybes, the personal piety that has answers for all the enigmas of life and death.

I've sometimes quoted some lines from a Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, in which he warned against treating God as a thing to be grasped. Do that, he said, and you end up holding a phantom. "God, the eternal Presence, does not permit Himself to be held. Woe to the man so possessed that he thinks he possesses God!"

Woe even more to the Church when it labours under the same delusion. When its wonder fades, its awe atrophies. When it wants to assert proprietorial rights over the Redeemer. When it lays claim to certainties which it cannot have by the very nature of things. Not only the nature of things, but more to the point by the very nature of the gospel.

The world – the world out there, and the world within each of us – still demands signs and wisdom. Still yearns for clarity. Still itches to get the mystery under control. Still wants to do away with faith's nerve-wracking ambiguity. Still thinks in ways that leave no space for the gospel.

And it still tempts us Christians to do violence to the faith we have received.

Paul this morning was saying: Beware! His words were not addressed to the mockers, the unbelievers, the outsiders. They were aimed at Corinth's Christians, the insiders. You see, believers themselves were starting to think and act in terms of what might win acceptance from outsiders. They might not have talked about making their religion "relevant," but that's what they were on about. Some, in their spiritual pride, thought they were even smarter at updating the faith than were others.

And Paul's response? He recalls them all to the centrality of the cross.

Not our kind of cross. Over twenty centuries we have grown accustomed to Christianity's principal symbol. We've sung about it, polished it, been signed with it in baptism, covered it with gold, embroidered it on vestments. We've romanticised the cross, made it into something beautiful, civilised, decorous, tame, soft. That's not what Paul was talking about.

He meant the cross as it really was. Ugly. Bloody. Repulsive. An instrument of execution. Criminals were put to death on crosses.

But more than that. He meant all that Christ's death represented. Tom Wright, the former bishop of Durham, describes the cross as Jesus' final, great act of love. *"It draws to a climax all those actions throughout his ministry – his touching of a leper, his tenderness towards the chronically sick or bereaved, his*

tears at Lazarus' grave – in which we see the deeply human, and ... characteristically God-filled Jesus truly at work."

Paul was saying that God's way of being and doing is radically different from all human ideas of greatness and wisdom, power and success.

That's why the Church, when it's doing its job, still makes no pretence of offering the world either conclusive evidence or irrefutable wisdom. Why the message it presents still refuses to mesh comfortably with the demands of any group, the predilections of any person, the ideology of any political party, the assumptions of any world view.

And it's why the Church must be on guard against oft-heard yearnings for to a Christianity the world will deem "relevant". The Church's message *is* relevant and will remain so as long as we Christians are resolutely true to ourselves. If that means for us, as it meant for the Corinthians, being out of step with the prevailing culture, then so be it. We march to the beat of a different drummer.

Yes, as we remembered on Reformation Sunday last year, continuing reform is part of the Church's calling – but true reform is always *in the light of the logic of the gospel, never violating that logic much less substituting something else for it*.

I like a title the Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama chose for one of his books. "There's no Handle on the Cross," he called it. We do not control Christ. His significance is not ours to manipulate or amend. The cross, and all it represents, stands or falls in its terms alone.

Its terms involve a new kind of power, a different kind of wisdom. Those terms scandalised people then. They scandalise people still.

Whether people in a particular time, place or culture like it or not, the Church insists on telling its crazy story of a crucified God. It points to Calvary, that appalling spectacle of weakness and folly. And it claims that there, for those with the eyes to see, is an authentic revelation of the heart of God.

I have referred before to a prayer Archbishop Ted Scott, then primate of the Anglican Church of Canada, liked to use when he opened meetings of the World Council of Churches. "*God of truth,*" he would pray, "*grant to all who teach the wisdom to know they are not wise; and to all who learn the understanding that they do not understand*".

A good prayer, and not only for ecclesiastical high-flyers in need of a little humility. It's a good prayer too for each of us, especially as once again we move towards Holy Week and Easter. For it seeks freedom from the world's illusions and pretensions. Freedom, so that we may contemplate afresh the amazing folly so much wiser than human wisdom, the gracious weakness so much stronger than human strength.

Yes, the cross is a burden to be borne, a way to be followed. But before that, it is a gift to be received, a revelation in whose light life's wondering deepens into worship.

May your wondering, this Lent, be blessed.

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