

The Crux of Christianity

SERMON TEXT: 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Dearly beloved in the Lord, our sermon's text for this morning is taken from St. Paul's first epistle to the Church in Corinth, which reads as follows:

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. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

Let us pray...

O Heavenly Father, by Your Holy Spirit, through Your Holy Law, You have shown us our sins and by Your Holy Spirit, through the powerful proclamation of Your Gospel, You have shown us our Saviour, Your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. By Your Holy Spirit, through the Holy Sacraments that You have bestowed upon us, You have sanctified us to be Your own righteous sons, redeemed in Your sight for the sake of Your Son. By Your

Holy Spirit, through the preaching which those perishing in the world perceive as folly, You have powerfully prepared for us a place in Your presence according to Your Word. By Your Holy Spirit, O God, You call us to gather around the preaching of Your Christ crucified. By Your Holy Spirit, therefore, show Your servants Your favour and prepare our hearts and minds to continually discern that powerfully wise Word which alone brings us unto Life Everlasting. Amen.

The foolishness of preaching is not the preaching of foolishness. We preach Christ crucified. Christ crucified: a scandalous thought to some and utter folly to others. We preach Christ crucified. Christ crucified: the power and wisdom of God to save all who believe. We preach Christ crucified. To the Jews of St. Paul's day, the preaching of God's Messiah being hung upon a tree to die a humiliating death brought about offence rather than belief. Still, to this day, we continue to preach Christ crucified. To the Greeks of St. Paul's day, the preaching of God's Christ dying in weakness as one of us, in order to bring us all to Life, brought about ridicule rather than belief. Still, to this day, we continue to preach Christ crucified. The foolishness of preaching, however, is not the preaching of foolishness.

In St. Paul's day, the preaching of the cross had been a major cause of contention because its message runs contrary to the wisdom of this world. In our own day, its message continues to confound and manifest contempt from those who reject its wisdom as God's own. So it was for all the days in between and so it will remain for all the days still to come. Yet, the crux of Christianity *is* Christ crucified. So, we preach Christ

crucified. Christ crucified: the power and wisdom of God to save all who believe. Christ crucified: a scandalous stumbling block.

To the Jews, who had for centuries been looking for a conquering Messiah to restore their place of prominence by restoring King David's throne, the thought of the Messiah as a suffering servant ran counter to their every expectation. Furthermore, how could God's Anointed be accursed by God Himself by being lifted, up on high, to die upon a wooden cross? After all, as it is written in the Torah, the Law, the Books of Moses, "anyone who is hung [on a tree] is cursed in the sight of God." So, how could Jesus be the blessed Messiah of Israel if, by His death on a cross, He was not only condemned by the power of the secular authority but also accursed by God Himself based upon the sacred authority of Holy Scripture? Christ crucified: a scandalous stumbling block. Yet, in failing to ease their consciences through their attempts to uphold God's righteous requirements, through their own moral failure, the Jews— of all people— should have recognized that truth which was proclaimed through the ritualistic practices of substitutionary sacrifice that God had instituted. They should have been able to discern through God's Word that God's Anointed, His Christ, would become accursed in our stead so as to set us free from God's curse. He would serve as their scapegoat— our scapegoat! He would serve as their sacrificial lamb— our sacrificial lamb! His blood would bring about their atonement— our atonement! Yet, their pride in their own wisdom blinded them to the wisdom of God's ways. They were given God's Law to show them the seriousness of their sin. Only in understanding the depths of their sin, could they come to understand the nature of its solution. The commandments that God

had given were *all* broken by *all*. Yet, these commandments, in truth, were given to break us. Christ, in truth and in turn, was given over to be broken on a cross in order to bind us, to make us whole again through the forgiveness of our sins. This is the scandalous stumbling block which runs against this world's wisdom.

Today, Muslims rail against Christ's cross as a scandal that slanders God Himself. They claim that no prophet of God would suffer such a disgraceful death. Perhaps they need to hear of what had happened to John at the hands of Herod, at the prompting of Herodias? Perhaps they need to hear clearly from Holy Scripture the fate that befell almost every prophet of God in the past? Nevertheless, they continue to claim that no prophet of God would suffer such a disgraceful death. They, therefore, deny that Christ was crucified and claim that instead it only *appeared* as though this was the case. Like the Jews, they won't see the wisdom of God powerfully displayed through such a death. Both Jew and Muslim stumble as we preach Christ crucified. *At the cross*, God dealt with sinners in a manner which did not abrogate the high demands of His own holiness. *On the cross*, God's Christ, being fully God and fully man, bore the full punishment from God for all mankind. *Through the cross*, perfect justice intersected with mercy and grace. *Under the cross*, the salvation of sinners is available to all who believe. So, we preach Christ crucified. Christ crucified: the power and wisdom of God to save all who believe. Christ crucified: foolishness to the worldly-wise.

To the Greeks, the Gentiles, who considered man, or more accurately man's reason, to be the measure of all things, the message of the cross was considered to be foolish. It was utterly unreasonable to those who worshipped human reason. It was, to quote the

Epicurean and Stoic philosophers who addressed St. Paul in Athens, a “strange doctrine.” It was considered, to quote Pliny the Younger a few decades later, a “pernicious superstition.” It was rejected as folly. It is still being rejected as folly to this very day. For today’s Deists—those who posit a creator-god who is like a clockmaker that just walked away from the clock that he made, winding it up and letting it just wind down—it is the thought that God would care at all, let alone care enough to come among us and die for us, that is too unfathomable and foolish an idea to entertain. For others, it is more the mechanism that serves as the target of their mocking: How could God come as a man, let alone die as one? Why would God suffer in our flesh for the sake of flesh? For others, far too many others, the notion of appeasing the wrath of God, which our sin aroused, is simply insurmountable since, by their estimation, we’re not really guilty of any wrongdoing in the first place. Furthermore, worldly wisdom holds self-sacrifice in contempt as it runs counter to the greater instinct for self-preservation. The strong laying down their lives for the weak is counterintuitive to a culture that elevates the individual and makes “survival of the fittest” its mantra. Strength and assertive power are admired; weakness and submission are shunned. Yet, we preach Christ crucified. Christ crucified: the power and wisdom of God to save all who believe.

The foolishness of preaching is not the preaching of foolishness. The mechanism by which God creates and sustains salvific faith is, admittedly, almost as confounding as the means by which He redeems. Nevertheless, we preach Christ crucified. Yes, preaching the good news of Christ’s person and work for the sake of the world *is* the powerfully wise Word by which people come to know God—faith is not produced by

threats, arguments, or human effort. Through the preaching of both Law and Gospel, it is the Holy Spirit who breaks and binds. Through the preaching of God's Law, those comfortable in their sins are afflicted; through the preaching of the Gospel, those afflicted by their sins are comforted. So, we preach Christ crucified, the crux of Christianity. We preach the good news of Christ's fulfilling of the Law's demands in our place so as to set us free from the condemnation which our own conscience corroborates. Furthermore, this preaching not only sets our souls free as it speaks of our being reconciled with God, but also carries us to live a cruciform life of reconciliation with one another. Yes, the foolishness of preaching is not the preaching of foolishness. Brothers and sisters, we don't need to work miracles to satisfy sign-seekers, we don't need to propound a fancy philosophy to entertain intellectuals, and we don't need clever arguments or advanced marketing methods to woo the world in order to impress Christ upon it. We preach Christ Crucified. That is the crux of our faith. It is the heart and substance of our message. It is through such preaching that *God* demonstrates *His* saving wisdom and reveals *His* mighty power among those whom *He* calls by *His* Word. To God alone be all the glory. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding— that peace procured through the crucifixion of His Christ— keep our hearts and minds at peace, unto Life everlasting. Amen.