

March 3, 2024 - Lent 3

Prayer of the Day

Holy God, through your Son you have called us to live faithfully and act courageously. Keep us steadfast in your covenant of grace, and teach us the wisdom that comes through Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Christian Scripture - 1st Corinthians 1:18-25

The message about the cross is foolishness 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, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

Sermon

When I began working with St. Philip's Lutheran Church in Kitchener, back in 2001, I was asked by the congregation's women's group (called the Evangelical Lutheran Women, or ELW for short) to come to one of their monthly gatherings. They wanted to meet me, and I wanted to meet them, so of course I went.

For the "Program" portion of the meeting, they asked me to give them a list of my favourite Bible passages, and to explain why they were my favourites. I had not done that before, so it was a fun exercise.

I was quite frankly surprised, when I began compiling it, how long the list became! There were passages from the Hebrew Scriptures (what we call the Old Testament) and the Greek Scriptures (what we call the New Testament). There were stories and psalms, there were theological treatises and rants, there were prayers and parables. I don't have that list anymore (at least I can't find it right now), but I remember the exercise of putting it together.

I do remember that the so-called Great Commission, from the end of Matthew's gospel, was number one. "Go make disciples...."

I also remember that the reading above, from the beginning of 1st Corinthians, was number two on my list. "The message about the cross is foolishness...." And, "We preach Christ crucified...."

This is an incredibly challenging passage, which, if we really get into the nitty gritty of it, pretty much cuts *all* of us off at the knees. So, either as a self-defense mechanism (to avoid the sting), or through simple repetition and familiarity, we skip the nitty gritty part, and just say, "Oh yes, Jesus was crucified, but we know it ends with resurrection, so there was purpose behind the cross, and that makes it a good thing."

At one level, this makes complete sense. We know the story! We know that Good Friday is followed by Easter. It's the reason we do this stuff called church!

But I also think that we, as the church, have gone out of our way to try to avoid the pain, the ugliness, the outright shame of the cross. And one way we try to do this is by attaching some kind of "meaning" to it.

I was talking with some folks this last week about this. They had been hearing the term “Substitutionary Atonement” in their church, and wondered what it was all about.

Put in its simplest form, it was an explanation of the cross formulated by a well-meaning man named Anselm (who lived from 1033-1109), who suggested, using the vocabulary of his day, that God’s honour was offended by human sin and needed to be paid off, or “satisfied.” Since imperfect human’s were incapable of doing this (because of our sin), God became the perfect human in Jesus to die “in our place,” and offer a perfect sacrifice so that God’s honour would be “satisfied.”

This explanation of the cross has gained wide popularity in the church, and is still proclaimed today. We’ve all heard the phrase, “Jesus died for our sins”; Anselm’s explanation of the cross is behind this.

I know this sounds all scholarly and philosophical, and (quite frankly), it is!

The problem I have with this explanation is that it is an *explanation* of “the thing,” and not “the thing” itself. It tries to get at the *meaning* of the cross, without coming to grips with the actual reality of it.

What happened on the cross was not a religious sacrifice. What happened on the cross was not an appeasement of God, or a satisfying of God’s honour.

What happened on the cross was a lynching. It was a publicly performed, legally sanctioned murder. It was an excruciating, torturous way of trying to get rid of someone who challenged our status quo.

And there is the sting of the cross. God didn’t need Jesus to die; we did.

But by trying to “explain” it in any other way, either religiously or philosophically, we are trying to avoid that sting, that challenge, that awful reality.

Which means, quite frankly, that we intentionally join ourselves to the people at whom Paul points in this passage, which might be paraphrased as “Religious people seek miracles, signs and wonders, and secular people demand explanations, science and logic.” And Paul insists that *all* of these well-meaning folks miss the mark. Which means that we miss the mark, *too*.

This is hard stuff. It’s *supposed* to be hard! It’s supposed to challenge, and sting, and bring us to our knees.

Elie Wiesel was an author, who wrote a book entitled Night. It recounts some of his experiences and reflections on being a Jew in the concentration camps in Europe during World War 2.

He tells the following story.

“One day, as we returned from work, we saw three gallows. Roll call. The SS surrounding us, machine guns aimed at us; the usual ritual. Three prisoners in chains [stood before us, two men, and one young boy].

The three condemned prisoners together stepped onto the chairs. In unison, the nooses were placed around their necks. [...] The boy was silent.

“Where is merciful God, where is he? someone asked behind me.

At the signal, the three chairs were tipped over. [...] We were weeping.

Then came the march past the victims. The two men were no longer alive. Their tongues were hanging out, swollen and bluish. But the third rope was still moving: the child, too light [for the rope to break his neck], was still breathing...

And so he remained for more than half an hour, lingering between life and death, writhing before our eyes.

And we were forced to look at him at close range. He was still alive when I passed him. His tongue was still red, his eyes not yet extinguished.

*Behind me, I heard the same man man asking: "For God's sake, where is God?"
And from within me, I heard a voice answer: "Where is He? This is where--hanging
here from this gallows..."
That night, the soup tasted of corpses."*

This is hard stuff. It's **supposed** to be hard! It's supposed to challenge, and sting, and bring us to our knees.

Which is what Paul was attempting to do in proclaiming "Christ crucified." And what **I** try to do, too.

This passage did not make my "favourite" list because it's easy, or comforting, or reassuring. It made it because it is none of those things. It made it because it challenges our easy explanations and philosophical rationalizations. It made it because it bring us **all** to our knees, religious **and** secular, wonder-seeking **and** logic-seeking, Jew **and** Gentile, and everyone in between.

Yes, we are travelling toward Easter. But the cross is how we get there. May we be aware of God's presence with us as we all make this journey: Paul **and** Anselm, you **and** me, and indeed, the whole creation, surrounded and carried by the foolish wisdom of God. Amen.

Prayers of the People

A - Trusting the promise that we will be heard, we offer our prayers for all the hurting world.

[Short pause]

A - Cross bearer, you willingly bore the cross for the sake of all, identifying with everyone those who is considered expendable. May we **also** stand with those who are dismissed, disparaged or de-humanized, that your love may be proclaimed and seen. In faith we pray,

C - Gracious God, hear our prayer.

A - Disciple caller, you invite us to follow in the difficult footsteps of Jesus, in order to make peace, bring reconciliation, and radiate hope. Free us from fear, that we may continue to hold to our calling. In faith we pray,

C - Gracious God, hear our prayer.

A - Death embracer, you stand in solidarity with all who suffer. We pray for all victims of war, bloodshed, violence, injustice, oppression, and all the sicknesses which infect our lives. We especially remember those whom we name before you.

[Long pause]

Use each of us to spread your healing love in every corner of your world. In faith we pray,

C - Gracious God, hear our prayer.

A - Creation healer, we are called by the hurting world to work for restoration and reconciliation. Strengthen our resolve to pay attention to the pain, that we might recognize when and where we are summoned to bring hope and repair. In faith we pray,

C - Gracious God, hear our prayer.

P - Into your hands we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in your mercy; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

C - Amen.