

“The cross as the power of God” a sermon based on 1 Corinthians 1:18-31, preached at the evening service by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 29 January 2017.

The film “Hidden Figures” tells of black women working at NASA. It is 1961 and there is lingering segregation. The main control room is populated entirely by white men. Among the black women are three figures with particular gifts. One in mathematics, a computer brain. She eventually is appointed into the control room, but not without a struggle. They have never had women there before. They have never had a black woman there before. When she starts working there, the bathroom for coloured people is a long distance away. Shortly after she starts, she finds there is a coffee machine with the label “coloured” on it. I will not disclose it all, but the film portrays a system that imagines wisdom does not come from “coloured” people, only from white people, and it does not come from women, only from men. Fortunately, the women have amazing spirit and courage to challenge the system, and leaders have sufficient awareness to change it.

And so we find in the passage today, that the wisdom of God comes among those who are regarded as foolish, and attending to the source of such wisdom is a scandal to the system and ways of thinking that privilege other sources of wisdom.

That foolishness is represented by the significance we give to the cross.

Years ago I heard the wonderful Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama.

He compared the cross with a Japanese businessman’s lunchbox.

It was small and tidy and convenient, and it had a handle on it which meant it could be carried anywhere.

In contrast, said Koyama, there is no handle on the cross.

It is inconvenient.

Neal Plantinga, a US theologian, highlights the scandal of the cross.

Being glorified on a cross, Plantinga once noted, is like being enthroned on an electric chair, getting exalted at the end of a hangman’s noose, finding success on the gurney of lethal injection.

How odd it would be today if a person wore a necklace with an electric chair pendant or earrings in the shape of a noose.

He asks - How did the cross—as terrifying a symbol of death and painful execution as there was in the Roman Empire—become the thing to adorn your body with, to set atop a church steeple, to grace the covers of a million church bulletins?

One writer wrote this:

Some while back I entered one of the most sobering spaces I have ever been in: it was the lethal injection execution chamber in a state penitentiary. There is no hope in this room. This is death, the end of the line, the place where you wind up when your every appeal for life has been rejected by the courts and when the governor has turned his back on your clemency request. There is no hope, no life, no glory here. Same as Golgotha.

In 1 Corinthians Paul wrestles against the very fabric of a first century worldview - the ways people knew to operate in this world. Such wisdom might have looked like this: *Those with the most flair and persona of authority will come out on top. Look out for yourself and the honour of your own group. Whatever you do, just be sure to make your social class known. Make sure those below you remain there, but at the same time make yourself look good and benevolent. If you have "knowledge," it means you can really act as you please, especially if your social class helps you. You who are of greater status in this community -- you should have greater influence and the first seat in the community's gatherings. Pursue the things that are viewed as more "spiritual" and make sure it is known to all -- this means you are closer to God.*

Where do we naturally find "wisdom" today, where do we recognize power and prestige? What is the "wisdom" that drives our church, for example? Do we seek to build relationships with those in the community who will only benefit our congregation?

The Greek for foolishness is morian, moronic.

On the one hand, there are people who want "evidence". Show us the evidence that will prove Jesus was the Son of God. The idea of a Messiah who died on a Roman cross under the curse of God, is not merely nonsense; it is blasphemous. A crucified Messiah was a skandalon, a stumbling block for people who think that if God is going to save the world, God will do it through power and strength.

On the other hand, there are Greeks, for whom the idea of a crucified God doesn't fit into the mindset of those whose gods fight on Mt. Olympus or who have no gods at all. They are offended by a God who immerses in humanity, in creation, to adopt it, to heal it, to make it whole.

Paul preached Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Greeks.

Kierkegaard said "Christianity has taken a giant stride into the absurd." "Remove from Christianity its ability to shock and it will be altogether destroyed. It then becomes a tiny superficial thing, capable of neither inflicting deep wounds nor of healing them."

Crucifixion was capital punishment meted out by the Roman Empire, an imperial instrument to suppress subversion.

A public spectacle to shame victims.

A political statement declaring that all who threatened the imperial social order would find themselves crucified with the current victim.

In countering the empire, Paul says the cross is means God has chosen to encounter humanity.

God comes in absolute love and refuses to bow to the Empire or the ways of the Empire.

God embraces humanity through the cross.

By choosing this image, Paul is confronting the forms of social, theological, spiritual, and moral elitism that have fractured and stratified God's church in Corinth. Paul undercuts elitist perspectives.

At the same time, the cross becomes the key for understanding not only God, but understanding ourselves as people called by God. Proclaiming the cross gives people the experience to encounter God precisely where God has most clearly displayed God's self, God's power, God's wisdom, in weakness, and solidarity, in powerlessness and emptiness.

Even today there are people who wish to rid Christianity of something as violent as a cross.

They want to turn Christianity into a feel good, feel positive, shallow religion.

They remove crosses from their church because it makes people feel uncomfortable.

Such religion is the privilege of the privileged, not the faith of the dispossessed and powerless and hungry and thirsty and yearning.

With a young Jewish woman I have been to Dachau and seen the ovens and the showers and the piles of Jewish bodies.

I have been to a leprosy village where mentally unwell lepers were treated appallingly.

I have been to a refugee camp, surrounded by a barbed wire fence, with a small malnourished child among 20 thousand people longing for nationhood, as bombs landed nearby.

I have been to villages on rubbish dumps and seen people reheating a discarded McDonalds meal as their only food for a family.

I have met with prisoners unjustly imprisoned and trade unions picketing for the most basic of human rights.

I have read many stories of women abused by clergy in the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand.

For me, a god who makes no sense there, makes no sense.

A god who is only for the privileged, the people on top, the people with enough, is not a god for me.

I want a god who knows powerlessness, weakness, poverty, and whose love is known there.

The last temptation of Christ, a book that became a movie.

The writer had Jesus thinking about skipping out when the conditions became dire. Go back to Nazareth, marry, have a family, take up carpentry, get out of this.

And he didn't.

We preach Christ, and him crucified.

Not some benign teacher of a time gone by.

But a Christ who stood with people in the most dispossessed situation in life, and who reveals who we believe God most truly is.

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