

1 Corinthians 1:10-18 Cross Wisdom
January 22, 2023

As you know, I love, and am a student of history, that is, of the past and its artifacts. I am sure that at least part of why I love the Bible *is because* it is historical, not only in the sense that it tells stories from the past, but that it is itself a piece of history, it is one of the artifacts.

The other reason that I love the Bible is because I believe it speaks a message from God to us. It is not only a voice from a long ago people, but from beyond space and time. Among its most important messages is the one found in the first chapter of First Corinthians:

“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God.”

There are other voices, of course; for instance, science, and though it has forced us to reconsider how we understand the universe in which we live in terms of space and time, and many other facets of life, it does not speak to us from beyond time, but from within it, it speaks of the material, not the eternal realm.

And political voices: that speak of justice and equality and freedom in ways quite different from the past, when kings and kingdoms were the order of the day.

Instead, we talk about democracies, and governments of the people, and the Bill of Rights.

And economic voices that force us to listen to a vocabulary unknown in antiquity; socialism and capitalism, unemployment and inflation, supply and demand, free markets and the regulatory environment, things like that, involving a complex web of relationships between people.

There is the world of many things; music, art, literature, sports, fashion, travel; all constitute voices, this world's voices, for a time, we listen, they each have their place . . . but they are not *cross* voices.

We ought to take these voices seriously because *they are this world's voices*, and we live in this world. They, represent the wisdom of this age, and the folly too. They have their place, and it would be wrong to ignore them, but they do not address the meaning of our lives at the deepest level.

Thus we do not give up listening to the biblical message. Paul was arguing about divisions in the church, and at Corinth it was about loyalty to certain factions, leaders that were apparently like team-captains, and that sounds very familiar, and not very spiritual. *We* also are divided, not only in the church but also in the larger culture by the political, economic, scientific, and cultural teams we are on.

But neither Paul nor we are meant to be excessively devoted to those teams, but to seek and to know and to do God's will, to hear and proclaim a gospel message that, as it turns out, does not originate from this world's life; political, scientific, or economic, or even religious sources, voices the world is loud with.

Paul goes so far as to say that in terms of human wisdom, the message of the gospel is foolishness. He calls it the message of the cross. Without living our lives as if we are not in the Age of Reason and Science, the time of democracies, of the Industrial Revolution and the Global Economy, it is imperative that we *hear*, this message of the cross.

What is the foolish message Paul calls . . . cross? The first thing to say is that the cross itself is a part of history; it was a method of capital punishment. It was the electric lethal injection of its age, used in a number of past cultures.

Unlike modern attempts to avoid cruel and unusual punishment, it was designed to be brutal, to make examples of its victims. It was graphic and violent. We pause before it . . . our faith in Incarnation means that God became human, the victim of capital punishment.

On the human level it doesn't make any sense. Why do we say we follow such a person? Why do we ask people to invite such a person into their hearts? How could the death of such person have any power over this world? The cross itself was an expression of the world's power over Jesus.

On the human level what makes more sense is to accumulate as many of the earth's resources as is possible, to transform those resources into security, and pleasure. It is better to be the Roman than to be Jesus.

In the worst sense this logic led to a willingness to conquer almost for its own sake; to play the Alexander the Great or the Genghis Khan or the Napoleon. And we can apply this idea to our personal lives in any number of ways, a life spent accumulating things, storing up earthly treasures. Not so with Jesus.

On the Sunday before he was assassinated, Martin Luther King Jr. preached at the National Cathedral in Washington D.C. Among other things he said that day, there is this quote that I had never heard, but which bears our attention:

“For some strange reason, I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the way God's universe is made.”

While it is not directly associated with Corinthians text, it nevertheless offers a statement that comes close to communicating the meaning of cross wisdom . . . and power. There are really two ways one can go. One is our separate ways and to attempt to become what we can however we can no matter the implications or the consequences.

It turns out that living to ourselves (which is the wisdom of the world), can not save us. It bears no eternal significance. Devotion to such a life leaves us powerless to become the person God wills us to be, not to mention empty, exhausted. The end is destructive. It precludes knowing and doing God's will.

Conversely, we can pursue a life *together*, a life devoted to sacrifice and service, after the example of Christ, because it integrates us into a community, accepted and loved, accepting and loving, offers the possibility of helping others become the persons God intends for them to be, and by doing that, enabling us to draw closer to becoming what we ought to be. The power to do that is the message and wisdom of the cross. "The world is too much with us, late and soon. Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers."

There are crosses everywhere, in churches and around the necks of saints and sinners, I have seen it on the faces of football players drawn in eye black, and, of course, on tall steeples pointing to the heavens.

Whenever you see one as you are driving down the road or on TV or hanging from a chain as a pendant from someone's neck, think about this kind of life. To those who are perishing it is folly, but to the one's in the process of being saved, it is the power beyond power to change the heart, renew the mind, and little by little change the world. It is God's power, it bears eternal significance, and saves the soul . . .

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