

Reading: Exodus 20:1-17; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

Text: 1 Corinthians 1:18 - For 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.

Theme: *The foolishness of the cross shows the brilliance of God*

Imagine yourself telling someone who has never heard of Jesus and the Christian understanding and experience of God, or who has heard but still a little fuzzy, that God was crucified to redeem the world from its sins. What kind of reaction might you have received?

That's right. She is likely to look you over from head to toes to make sure you were ok, for such an idea would have been considered crazy and foolish, even insulting to one's intelligence. Well, Paul did exactly that, confident in the merit of his understanding and experience of God through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

He did it twice, and of places, at the two main centres of the known world Athens and Corinth. He said it first in Athens (Acts 16:17-32) and, then, in his first letter to the Church in Corinth, which forms the Epistle reading for today.

At the time of Paul's ministry, from 36 to 68AD, Athens and Corinth were the main centres of the known world. If you needed to be somewhere fancy and sophisticated, and a little intimidating, these were the two cities where you would like to be at; much like Queanbeyan and Canberra, I would say.



Athens was the fabled city of culture and knowledge, but it was long past its glory days. But it was still holding on to its main claim to power and fame as the knowledge capital of the world. It was the home of the fabulous three of Greek philosophy, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, and the Stoics and Epicureans were still vying for supremacy in the market for knowledge and new ideas. Everyone wanted to be educated or simply be in Athens. Even Rome's high society considered being in Athens as a 'feather on one's hat'.

Corinth, on the neck-of-land that joins the Peloponnese to the mainland of Greece, about 70 km west of Athens (see map), was fairly 'modern' and the Romans made it the provincial capital of Greece. It never reached the height of Athens in culture and knowledge, but it was much larger than Athens and it was the New York City

of the ancient world.

In Athens, Paul gave a speech to the council where he told them that, God "*has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead,*" (Acts 17:31). The account of Acts says that, '*when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked,*' (Acts 17:32).

Today's epistle reading is from Paul's first letter to the Church in Corinth, a Church he founded in the early 50s. In today's passage, he is reminding the Corinthians that the gospel that he taught them is founded on the crucified Lord, whom God raised from the dead and now dwells with God in heaven. It

may sound foolish *'to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God,'* (1 Cor. 1:18).

Now, if you take a survey of human history and cultures, you should be able to find that people everywhere never had much difficulties in perceiving that there is a god out there. Some thought there were many, and a chosen few perceived the presence of a 'head god' who was all powerful and in charge of all things.

We tend to think that Abraham and Israel were the first to know there is one God Almighty, but this is not so. In Genesis 14, there is an account of Melchizedek who was the king of Salem and high priest of God Most High (Gen 14:17-18). Abraham gave 10 percent of everything he owned to Melchizedek. Also, a survey by Don Richardson showed that there was someone like Melchizedek in all cultures, who could perceive a Creator God beyond creation (*Eternity in their hearts*, 1981).

The Samoan and Polynesian people also have an Almighty God, who is fairly similar to the God of the Bible. His name, Tagaloalagi, suggests he is free, is all powerful, and he lives forever in heaven; not far from God I AM of the Bible.

What people have had difficulty with is the character of God and things like gender and the abode(s) of God. This may explain why we have a great diversity of religion. And even within each religion, there are often different understandings of god(s) among the adherents. For example, the split of the movement that eventually became the Church from Judaism was, in part, due to differences in understandings of the God of the Bible.

To this day, Jews and Christians still struggle in their understanding of the God of the Bible. It feels like the more one wants to know God, the more God becomes mysterious. Today we read about the ten commandments that God gave Moses and the Israelites while they were in the wilderness. It is apparent that the intention was to encourage good relationships between the Israelites and God, and between the people themselves. It shows the law giver cares for the recipients' welfare. It is supposed to help them live in harmony. But the law got interpreted until it produced 613 precepts. In the end, it became too onerous and too difficult for the people to follow.

In the gospel reading, we see again this struggle to understand God when the religious leaders totally miss the point of Jesus' statement that, he could rebuild the church in 3 days. They immediately think about a physical building when Jesus is talking about a community of people.

And even within the same community, people can still disagree. And that is what is happening in the Church in Corinth. It seems like Paul had taught them about the death and resurrection of Jesus, but some have come and taught a new theology, or at least one that employs philosophy and eloquent rhetoric. In the verses before today's passage, there is a suggestion that this new teacher, or teachers, despised Paul's theology and rhetorical skills.

Martin Luther revisited the dispute in Corinth when he developed a theology of the cross in the theses that he wrote, which inspired to the reformation and the split of Western Church to Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. He argued that the church had been preaching a theology of glory when it should have been preaching a theology of the cross.

Luther argued that a theology of glory saw God as one created in the image of man, where God was like a superman. Thus, when they talked about the power of God, they were thinking about the kind of power that they saw in kings and military leaders, with authority to destroy people. This kind of theology could

not comprehend the notion of God taking up human form in the person of Jesus of Nazareth for the simple fact that it was a theology that was based on human logic, alone.

In contrast, the theology of the cross built its understanding on the crucified Jesus on the cross and saw things from the opposite of human understanding. This was why it looked foolish to the wise of the world, but it was brilliant to those that were saved. **And the brilliance was this:** It took away our desire to work out our own salvation, and left it totally in the 'hands' of God.

Church historian Carl Trueman has argued that, all the important theological concepts are susceptible to human beings casting them in their own image, so they must be recast in the light of the cross. German theologian, Jürgen Moltmann, makes a useful contribution in this area in his book, *The Crucified God*.

Moltmann was not a Christian when he was captured and made a prisoner of war near the end of the Second World War. He converted and was horrified by the stories about Hitler's death camps and the horror of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He decided to devote himself to the study of the mystery of God who is incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth and Jesus' death on the cross. The result is some illuminating insights on the human condition and the nature of God.

One concept that Moltmann found very useful is the Trinity. He argues that a God that loves can only be understood from a trinitarian perspective, because love is never alone; it occurs only within a community of people, and the trinitarian God is a community of three persons, though one God.

Also, from a trinitarian vantage point, each of the three persons of God is a perfect representation of the others. So Jesus, as the Christ and God the Son, is a perfect representation of God the Father and God the Spirit. This allows God to experience living as a human being and to experience all the dramas of human life including our suffering, even suffering a humiliating death on the cross. Moltmann argues that only such a God can save us for he suffers with us and he understands its pain.

The theology of glory is still going strong nowadays in its current incarnation as the Prosperity Gospel. It still looks like its old self, seeing things in the image of the believers, but mostly of its leaders. The leaders are often lavished with gifts and are venerated like powerful gods. But God came to us in weakness and God's weakness is stronger than human strength (v25). It may look foolish to some but, again, God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom (v25).

We are on the third Sunday of Lent. Near the end of Lent, we shall be remembering God's death on the cross. Lent ends when God returns from the dead. This is the most beautiful time in the church calendar each year, when we journey with God through the 'wilderness', and we find our salvation at the end through the work of the crucified Lord.

Rejoice, people of God, 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.

The foolishness of the cross clearly shows the brilliance of God.

For the glory of God. Amen