

# The Transformative Preaching of the Cross

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[ 0 : 00 ] Our reading is from 1 Corinthians chapter 1 and you'll find it on page 1144 in your pew Bibles.

1 Corinthians chapter 1 and beginning to read from verse 18. For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are saved it is the power of God.

For it is written, Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age?

Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him. God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.

Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.

[ 1 : 14 ] But to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards. Not many were influential. Not many were of noble birth.

But God chose the foolish things of this world to shame the wise. God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things, and the things that are not to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.

It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God. That is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.

Therefore, as it is written, Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord. This is the word of the Lord. Thank you.

[ 2 : 36 ] Well, let me extend my own welcome to you this morning. My name is Jonathan, as Robbie already mentioned. I'm one of the ministers in training here at St Silas. And our pastor, Martin, is currently been down in Cambridge for a university reunion.

I can't personally think of anything worse, but he assures me that he's there on legitimate grounds conducting research for sermon illustrations.

A goldmine, he reckons. So we look forward to that when he returns. And he'll pick up the second part of the passage that was read this morning.

We're going to be focusing on verses 18 to 25. Do keep your Bibles open at 1 Corinthians chapter 1. Before she died, Queen Elizabeth wrote, and I think it was published just in the last few months, but Queen Elizabeth II wrote that, Throughout my life, the message and teachings of Christ have been my guide, and in them I find hope.

With these sentiments in mind, let us bow together and pray and ask for God's help as we come to this passage. Let's pray.

[ 4 : 02 ] Heavenly Father, our Queen is dead, but our King Jesus is alive.

Lord God, we pray that you would impress on us the message of the cross, the power of God in this foolish message of the cross.

And Lord God, may we be confident in it. I pray that your Holy Spirit would open our eyes to its truth and apply it to our lives.

For in Jesus' name we pray. Well, the message of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved, it is the power of God.

How do we view the cross of Jesus Christ? Now perhaps you are new to church, and maybe you're here this morning just exploring what the Christian faith is all about.

[ 5 : 10 ] You might be wondering, what's the big deal? What's this got to do with me? What's someone's death on a cross over 2,000 years ago got to do with me?

It might sound a bit foolish to you. It might even be a bit of a stumbling block. It might be things that are attractive to you about Jesus' life and ministry, but you're just not sure why a loving God should demand Jesus' life and death on the cross.

Of course, for many of us here this morning who are Christians, the cross represents and signifies the good news that Jesus died for our sins, bearing the burden of our guilt and reconciling us to God's, his victory over death, giving us hope for an eternal future.

But because of what the gospel truth that the cross has come to symbolize, because of what it's come to symbolize, it's often displayed in our churches and even around our necks and pieces of jewelry and things like that.

And so in the 21st century, we view the cross very differently to how it would have been regarded in the 1st century AD. And it's this cultural gap that makes it hard for us to understand and appreciate just how offensive this message of the cross would have seemed in the ancient world.

[ 6 : 42 ] a cross, which was the most humiliating form of punishment in the ancient world. One writer suggests that to overcome this cultural gap, we should try to imagine the outcry and reaction would be if we were to attach a silver atomic mushroom cloud to the jewelry around our necks.

Imagine the outcry if we were to do that. And we get something similar to how the cross would have been regarded in Paul's time.

In any case, we regard the message of the cross. How we regard the message of the cross will reveal how we relate to God. How we regard the message of the cross will reveal how we relate to God, will reveal how we ought to relate to others around us.

In either way, we're going to see that there's no denying that the word of the cross is powerfully transformative. It is the cross that divides, it is the cross that subverts, and it is the cross that unites. Those are our three headings this morning. It should be in your green leaflets. It's the cross that divides, the cross that subverts, and the cross that unites.

[ 8 : 11 ] This is the power of the cross. Firstly then, the cross that divides. The church in Corinth had a problem.

It was divided. And if you were around last week, you'll already have seen in verses 11 to 12, and you'll see also throughout the letter, that the church is threatened by this division with factions fracturing the unity of the church.

And one group saying they follow Paul, another saying they follow Apollo, another, Cephas, and yet another group, which one commentator suggests is probably the most sanctimonious of the lot, saying, well, we follow Christ.

And we'll come on to this, but in our passage, there's another polarity introduced, another potential division between two groups with completely different outlooks on life, between the Gentiles and the Jews.

Of course, the church in Corinth is by no means unique in their spirit of divisiveness. It's an unfortunate, all too human trait in a fallen world.

[ 9 : 31 ] And I remember clearly the divisions that we had back at school, back at secondary school. And we were already divided because the girls were about a mile down the road and the boys were on this campus up here.

So by no fault of our own, we were divided already. But at lunchtime, if you were good at sports and played rugby and stuff like that, then you had to stand over here in the boys' dining hall.

And if you weren't so sporty instead of art and music and that kind of thing, then you had to stand over here and you were considered to be not cool. And if you were half decent at rugby and also an artist, they didn't quite know what to do with you, so you could just about float between the two.

But it's horrible really, isn't it? This mean-spirited divisiveness, this rancorous worldliness that leads to this kind of division.

And so that's why Paul's appealing in his letter to the church he'd established that this sort of shameful worldly division has no place in their church.

[ 10 : 40 ] And instead, he appeals to the church in verse 10 that they be perfectly united under the lordship of Jesus Christ. And so our passage from verses 18 to 25 is part of this broader call for unity that begins in verse 10 around the cross-shaped message of the gospel and for divisions to thereby cease.

And so in verse 18, Paul sets forth in no uncertain terms that at the end of the day there's only one division that counts. For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved it is the power of God.

He distinguishes between those who are perishing on the one hand and those who are being saved on the other. That's really the only division that ultimately counts for anything.

Our eternal destiny, saved or unsaved. the dividing line between these two groups is the message of the cross.

It is the cross that divides. Now perhaps you noticed in verse 18 the deliberate asymmetry that Paul introduces.

[12:02] When we read the first part of the verse that the cross is folly to those who are perishing, we expect the second half to say that it is the wisdom of God to those who are being saved.

Instead of the wisdom of God it says that the message of the cross is the power of God and you'll note this is very deliberate on Paul's part. Paul surprises his learned Corinthian readers by claiming that the message of the cross is not merely another philosophical system for them to grasp and adopt but the very power of God to transform lives by dealing with what human wisdom on its own cannot our sin and reconciling us to God.

And this you see is the transformative power of the cross. Somebody put it like this what the world deems to be foolish actually saves people from death.

Now we're going to be thinking just a little bit more about how this works but before we move on to our second heading I want us to consider a couple of implications. I think it's worth our while reflecting on a couple of implications that verse 18 brings into focus for us.

You see this message this message of a crucified saviour is going to sound foolish. It's going to sound foolish to many.

[13:34] So firstly then that might even be you this morning. You might be thinking I still don't get it. It just doesn't make that much sense to me. If that is you then I'd encourage you to keep on seeking keep on listening and keep on praying to God asking him to open your eyes to the truth about the transformative power of the cross.

But secondly if the message of a crucified saviour is going to sound foolish to many it's not for us to second guess who's being saved or not. Our task if we're followers of Christ is to proclaim the message of Christ crucified on the cross to those who Christ has placed around us and to be confident in this.

And that inevitably my friends will mean that there's times when we're going to look foolish because what we believe looks like foolishness to those who are perishing.

So are we prepared to look foolish for Christ? Are we prepared to look foolish by sharing a message that sounds foolish to those we're sharing it with?

Well I was away all last week at an academic residential for the pastor's training course and we heard from someone who'd been using his time at his local gym to build friendships with guys who are not Christian and don't know the message of the cross.

[15:11] Well he'd established a good rapport with one of these guys and eventually he plucked up the courage to ask him whether he'd maybe like to open the Bible and read it together with him sometime.

His friend replied I literally I literally can't think of anything worse to do with my time.

The message of the cross sounded foolish to him. My friend had to be prepared to look foolish for Christ and by the way he won't give up that easily I'm sure.

Before the residential a week before last we'd been away for the St. Silas staff training days. Our guest speaker was Mark Pickles and amongst other things we heard his testimony of how he came to trust in the Lord Jesus.

He'd come from a secular family his mum and dad didn't believe in Christ but had a good friend at school whom he knew to be a Christian.

[16:18] Now this was also a friend who was prepared to look foolish for Christ. When he invited Mark to church Mark said no.

But his friend wasn't to be perturbed. That rejection didn't stop him. He asked Mark again and again and the answer was still no.

And sometime later he invited Mark to church yet again and yet again Mark said no. It was only after asking him six or seven times that Mark finally relented and agreed to come to church where

he heard and responded to the message of the cross and was saved.

Such is the transformative power of the cross that the cross which divides the human race absolutely between those who are perishing and those who are being saved.

Well the cross that divides is also the cross that subverts. Now this sounds complicated but really it's not. To say that the cross subverts is to borrow the words of someone wiser than me is to say that it confronts and gets inside and picks and overthrows the world's stories about itself.

[ 17 : 40 ] That's what we're seeing right here in relation to the Jews and Greeks. The cross confronts, gets inside, unpicks and overthrows the world's stories.

But before we delve into that we might want to ask the question why? Why this subversive message? Why does God use it this way?

Well we're told why in verse 19. I will destroy, says God. I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, the intelligence of the intelligent, I will frustrate.

The reason why God chose the subversive message of the cross is to destroy human pride. Where is the wise person?

Where is the philosopher of this age? Where are the Richard Dawkins? Where are the Stephen Fry's? Where the human wisdom of this age is pitted against the eternal wisdom of God?

[ 18 : 46 ] There's only ever going to be one winner. The wise in their own eyes, according to the Bible, are going to end up looking foolish. The quotation here in verse 19 is from Isaiah in a passage that's basically a damning indictment of a hypocritical people who pay lip service to God but have been spiritually dulled.

Not the kind of church, in other words, that we'd want to become. And nor the Corinthian church. And so by using this particular quote, Paul is alerting his readers in Corinth to the very real danger he sees in their church of compromising the integrity of the message of the cross by dressing it up in wisdom and eloquence and thereby running the risk that the message of the cross be emptied and divested of its power.

Well perhaps in that sophisticated society around them, the Corinthian church, they perhaps didn't really like the idea that people around them would think they're foolish and begin to compromise. And you can see how it happens, can't you? Because if you live in a world that rejects the message of a Christ crucified and you want to be respected and approved of by the world around you, then you're going to begin to adopt the world's standards and follow the wisdom of the age.

That's what's going on in Corinth and that's what's going on very often in the liberal church today. When the church loses confidence in the message of the cross, it starts to mimic the world.

[ 20 : 35 ] world. The message of the cross that Christ died for our sins is sneeringly dismissed as a ghastly theology, cosmic child abuse.

But to relinquish the message of the cross is really to lose everything. to relinquish the message of the cross is to lose everything.

You see, the message of the cross is not a peripheral issue, it's crucial. It's absolutely crucial to our faith and that's why in the verse immediately preceding our passage, Paul has already highlighted the primacy of preaching the cross in his ministry.

Christ's death on the cross is central to the gospel, is central to the Christian world view. So what's a world view?

Well, a world view can be defined as a comprehensive explanation of reality, an attempt to establish meaning for our existence, providing a unifying system of thought into which all other thoughts can be unified.

[ 21 : 53 ] Basically, it's a big story about who we are, why we're here, and how we can find fulfillment. We need these stories, we need these world views to provide a foundation for our life, to provide certainty about the world around us.

And by the way, that's one of the reasons why there's so much anxiety in our fragmented postmodern society today, a society of rampant individualism, because if there is such a thing as a postmodern world view, if there is such a thing as a postmodern world view, it's that there is no singular world view.

Life means basically whatever you want it to mean. And this, in turn, results in a sort of collective meaninglessness to our existence.

sins. But to come back to our passage, we can see that there are a pair of world views with their correspondingly different sets of longings that are being contrasted for us.

The Jewish world view, if it's religious scholars and insatiable demands for miraculous signs to prove Jesus' claims. sins and the Greek world view, if it's intelligentsia and quest for human wisdom.

[ 23 : 20 ] And you see, the message of the cross is scandalous to both these world views, but it's scandalous in different ways. Verse 23, we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.

cross. The Jews simply couldn't countenance the weakness of a crucified savior.

The Greeks, for their part, thought it nonsensical that all the world's problems could be solved by the criminal execution of an innocent man. But here, I think, is where it gets interesting because the cross subverts these world views, and this applies equally to both Greek and Jew.

It subverts the Greek world view by demonstrating that human wisdom, no matter how lofty and eloquent, is ultimately impotent to meet our needs, to reconcile our sinful humanity to God.

God. And the cross upends the Jewish world view by showing that far from being a weakness, the crucified Messiah demonstrates the power of God to deal with the sin problem and to overcome death itself.

[ 24 : 49 ] But if this idea that the cross subverts applies to Greek and Jew alike, then it also applies to any other world view. Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? Verse 20.

And so if that applies to the wisdom of our own age, then the idea that the cross confronts and subverts the narrative threads of our postmodern culture means that there are opportunities for us to connect this message of the cross compellingly to those around us, whatever their world view may be.

And that's not to say that the message of the cross will not still sound foolish to many, but rather that as the Holy Spirit opens spiritual eyes, the message of the cross will be compelling to those who are being saved as they begin to see how it subverts and fulfills their own deepest longings.

This leads us on to our final heading for the cross that divides humanity is also the cross that subverts human worldviews is also the cross that unites.

There's one Christian philosopher in particular, Dan Strange, who's done a lot of thinking about worldviews and how we can connect to them.

[ 26 : 15 ] According to him, the message of the cross turns the tables on us by forcing us to look at the world in a new way because it shows the old ways to be useless and harmful.

It demands that we turn away from our old way of thinking and put our faith in the better story of Christ crucified. In this postmodern society in which we live, the content of the cross confronts absolute relativism with absolute truth.

But more than that, more than that, to a profoundly fractured and fragmented society, the message of the cross has an enormous power to unite.

You see, for all its individualism, our postmodern culture craves a sense of belonging, craves a sense of lasting connection and community, but it just doesn't know where to look for it.

I think it's one of the reasons why people are prepared to pay so much money for the Coldplay concerts. I was astonished to discover in my research for this morning that the cheapest seats in Manchester on our last gigs in the UK tour are 250 pounds, the most expensive ones going for more than a thousand pounds.

[ 27 : 45 ] I dare say, if I was being cheeky, they're not paying that purely for the music, but for the sense of connectedness and unity momentarily that that provides.

The message of the cross has a powerful capacity to unite, and it does so in two ways. Negatively, as we've already seen, the cross unites unsaved Jew and Gentile and our own secular society, for that matter, in their opposition to its message, a stumbling block to Jews, foolishness to the Greeks. But positively, in verses 24 to 25, this same foolish message has the power to unite together people of divergent world views, both converted Jews and Gentiles, to whom Christ has been revealed as both the power and the wisdom of God.

the church gathers into its fold all whom God has called, whatever our background, whatever our worldview. And so, here at the cross, diversity meets unity.

And that's the rich beauty of the church of Christ, isn't it? People from all walks of life who wouldn't otherwise encounter one another, let alone associate with one another in fellowship love, precious united by the gospel of the message of the cross.

[ 29 : 13 ] And that's a genuinely attractive quality, isn't it, for many today who long for community and inclusion but don't necessarily know where to find it.

A diverse, loving church family. I recently read the following story of one young person, a product of our post-modern age and how he arrived at placing his trust in Christ.

He said, I remember being 18 and having a deep philosophy that I really wanted everyone in the world to love me and for me to love everyone in the world.

I got converted going to a Christian camp where I found this for the first time. I distinctly remember Lance, a fat kid who had very low self-esteem.

The kind of kid you knew was used to being picked on. But I saw the cool kids befriend him and how it made him smile. It was totally the opposite of my experience at school.

[ 30 : 28 ] And that, I think, illustrates for us what church should be like. Illustrates for us why Paul is at such pains to eradicate the fault lines that threaten the unity of the church at Corinth with worldly division.

And which is so offensive to the unity and the witness of the message of the cross. In an aching void of postmodern insignificance, the content of the cross provides power and meaning and significance.

It has a powerfully unifying effect. So let us then cherish this Christ-won costly unity and seek to maintain it for the sake of the gospel.

And let us not be ashamed of the foolish message of the cross, but rather seek opportunities to share it with others. Trusting that the foolishness of God subverts human wisdom and the weakness of God far exceeds any human strength.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we give thanks to you for the powerful message of the cross.

[ 31 : 46 ] It appears foolish to those who are perishing, but demonstrates your power to those who are being saved. Let us trust in that. Let us be confident in that message.

And let us seek opportunities this week to share that message with those you have brought around us. And Lord God, we give thanks to you for our church family here at St.

Silas, for the unity that we enjoy, for the diversity of backgrounds. And we thank you that we can be united together under the cross of Christ and be reunited to you through the death of our Savior, Lord Jesus.

In his name we pray. Amen.