**2nd February 2020**

**1 Corinthians 1.18-31**

***18****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’* 1 Corinthians 1.18

I understand that Rod preached on the power of the cross last week and mentioned how the latest adaptation of Dracula on the TV has stayed true to the original Bram Stoker Victorian classic by retaining the importance and power of Christianity, especially the sign of the cross.

When I was at theological college nearly thirty years ago, the college also had ministerial students from the Unitarian Church – don’t ask me how that worked. There was one student, called Shandor, who was from Transylvania. Unitarianism is big in Transylvania apparently. If Shandor picks up this sermon, I would now publicly like to apologize for the jokes we made at his expense. It didn’t help that he looked like Bela Lugosi, that archetypal Dracula look – receding hairline, gaunt face, prominent teeth. We nicknamed him Count Shandor and the competition was whether anyone found his shadow. The most notorious incident came during the weekly college eucharist. I was sat next to him when the chalice of communion wine was passed round, and we had to serve each other. Count Shandor passed me the chalice and said, in that Transylvania accent ‘The blood of Christ, shed for you’. And I just erupted in laughter. That solemn pious moment, receiving the body and blood of Jesus and I’m laughing my head off. I promise I will try and hold it together when we celebrate around the table later.

For many Christianity is a laughingstock, the church an irrelevance and the cross is either offensive or foolish.

As we continue this passage in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, Paul contrasts the wisdom of the world with the foolishness of the cross and in a clever passage of rhetoric reverses those perceptions – that the foolishness of the cross actually brings salvation and is wiser than human wisdom.

How can something that seems utterly foolish to those who are wise in the world be a message of salvation?

The Corinthian Christians were an under-educated group, who were easily impressed by eloquent speakers (such as Apollos), but Paul tries to detach them from ‘superior culture’ by reminding them that not many of them were wise by human standards, or powerful, or of noble birth (v.26). He turns this to advantage by encouraging them to identify instead with the wisdom of God, which is foolishness to this world.

So, it is with the message of the cross: those who think it foolish are the ones who are perishing, while those who recognize the power of God in the cross are the ones who are being saved. The wise might have recognized God in creation (cf. Romans 1.19-21), but as they turned away from God, God has turned to apparent foolishness to save humanity. The Greeks look for philosophical wisdom and the Jews look for revelations in history, but what they are offered is a crucified criminal – though one who has been raised from the dead. Messiahs (anointed kings) are meant to rule in Jerusalem and defeat their enemies, not hang naked in shame on a cross. Yet ‘Christ [is] 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’ (1.24ff.). God has chosen what is of little significance in the world to be saved, including the Christian believers in Corinth, and has reversed conventional worldly values. None of this is a result of human effort, hence the quotation from Jeremiah 9.24: ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.’

Why does the world think the cross is foolish, even offensive? Who are the modern-day equivalents of the Greeks and Jews of Paul’s day?

On Wednesday this week several us went to see the Book of Mormon the musical in Bristol. It is a well hyped phenomenon which has meant it is the must-see stage production of the moment. It is a takedown of the Mormon religion and by association all religions. The medium was gross and designed to shock and provoke. Nothing about the takedown of religion was new to me – I got a lot worse from theological college. The assumption that all religion is absurd and made up - and for the gullible. Yet there was a little bit of redemption at the end in that it can also bind people together in a common shared value - but it’s still ridiculous.

To be honest the most offensive part of it was the casual racism in the depictions of Ugandans. In the musical two Mormon missionaries are sent to convert Ugandans. I spent three weeks in 1996 in northern Uganda - visiting a missionary! He was a hydro engineer on a Christian peace-making work - bringing fresh water as a way to bring warring tribes together. The musical portrayed Ugandans as gullible, godless and obscene. I found them to be the complete opposite. 1 in 4 in the village had Aids and the Lord's Resistance Army terrorised them - all that was true. But they were trusting God for their salvation, especially the hope of heaven because life on earth was pretty awful. So again, the musical had an agenda... which of course was whooped up by the predominantly 18-30 audience.

After the show I was amazed to see real life Mormon missionaries giving out literature outside the theatre. I spoke to one who was from Utah of all places! I said had he been to the show - no - did he know what it was about - no - just a blank smile at me and a refusal to engage. On Monday I had my haircut by an ex Mormon - and our conversation was how he got out. It's been a real Mormon week this week. Then to cap the evening off we stood waiting for a parking ticket pay booth and there was a homeless chap begging by it - so I engaged him in conversation. He was sleeping in a church hall tonight - the churches organize a rough sleeper’s provision. Those poor deluded churches...

My barber gave up on the Mormon faith because when he started to question it – he realized there wasn’t much evidence for it. In contrast I’d say the cross and Christianity is offensive to the modern person because we audaciously claim that there is evidence for our faith. The cross points to an actual event, a moment in history that changed history. Obviously, the resurrection made this a turning point and not just another death of a would be revolutionary.

Christianity is arguably the most scrutinized and criticised faith in the world – but that is good – we don’t want people to be gullible. We don’t want to believe a pack of lies. But we would hope that people investigate it for themselves – read balanced articles and not one-sided ones, nor to get away with the lazy prejudices being passed off as accepted wisdom – namely that all religion is ridiculous and unbelievable. The cross is offensive because it stakes out a claim for real, historical events that you can’t ignore and that if accepted change everything.

If Jesus is the Christ, the Word made flesh, God incarnate, then we are describing ultimate reality. What is at the heart of the universe. What are absolute values. The cross declares that we are loved by God – so much so that Jesus died for each one of us. That sacrifice was without conditions – Jesus even prayed for his enemies, the ones who crucified him – Father forgive them they don’t know what they are doing. The scoffers, the mockers, the rebels, the atheist, the persecutors – all included in the love of God. Each has worth. That is the ultimate value.

I don’t know if you caught any of the Holocaust commemorations this week on the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. It is still one of the most chilling and disturbing moments in history., That a ‘civilized’, advanced nation like Germany should be seduced by Nazi ideology and treat people as if they were sub human – not just the Jews, but the disabled, the homosexuals, the gypsies – anyone who was regarded as a weak link in society and would hold back the master race was transported off to the gas chambers.

Tom Holland writes[[1]](#endnote-1): Today, in the West, there are many who would agree with the beliefs of Heinrich Himmler, one of the architects of the Holocaust, that for humanity to claim a special status for itself, to imagine itself as somehow superior to the rest of creation, is an unwarrantable conceit. *Homo sapiens* is just another species. To insist otherwise is to cling to the shattered fragments of religious belief. Yet the implications of this view – which the Nazis, of course, claimed as their warrant for genocide – remain unsettling for many to face. Free thinkers who mock the very idea of a god as a dead thing, a sky fairy, an imaginary friend, can still piously hold to morals that palpably derive from Christianity.

In 2002, in Amsterdam, the World Humanist Congress affirmed “the worth, dignity and autonomy of the individual and the right of every human being to the greatest possible freedom compatible with the rights of others”. Yet this – despite humanists’ stated ambition to provide “an alternative to dogmatic religion” – was itself a statement of belief. Himmler, at any rate, had understood what license was opened up by the abandonment of Christianity. The humanist assumption that atheism and liberalism go together is just that: an assumption. Without the biblical dogma that God created humanity in his own image to draw upon, the reverence of humanists for their own species can’t help but seem mawkish and shallow.

When I was at theological college the Holocaust was always given as an example of the challenge to faith in a loving God. How could God let this happen – was the question. As I believed in a crucified Christ as well as a resurrected Christ, I understood that there is evil in the world in opposition to God’s good will. So actually, the Holocaust wasn’t a theological crisis to me. But I do believe it is a crisis for those who gathered in Auschwitz on Monday who want to uphold a secular view that we are all of worth and value. Without God, that is just wishful thinking.

The Cross anchors our values and beliefs about humanity and what is absolute reality. It speaks of the sin of the world – our rebellion towards God – which of course is offensive to modern people who don’t want to be told that they have fallen short of any standard. My life I do what I want, I live how I want, tolerance, so long as you don’t hurt anyone etc. etc. so no wonder the cross is offensive because it faces us with the sin of the world.

The Jews of Paul’s day thought the idea of a crucified Messiah laughable and a stumbling block. How could a convicted criminal shamed through crucifixion, be the lord of the universe. Life is about power – only the powerful win. Going back to the Holocaust it justified the creation of the Jewish homeland of Israel back in 1948. There was strong international support to give Jews a place of safety, a place of their own. That came of course at the expense of the Palestinians who were living there at the time and the conflict over land and rights have continued to this day. President Trump offered his deal this week to settle the issue but laughably he didn’t consult Palestinians over it. In retaliation the Palestinians are unilaterally announcing that Texas will become part of Mexico. Trump’s standpoint like most of history’s rulers, has been that those with the power make the decisions.

Having been to Israel I know that about 30% of Israelis disapprove of their government’s treatment of Palestinians but fear wins at the ballot box. The holocaust is still strong - at Yad Vashem the Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem is the sign ‘Never again’ with the implications that Israel must never become weak and subjugated again. Which of course can lead to mistreatment of the other who they feel is a threat.

A weak crucified Messiah is a threat to those who want power in the world. Who can’t cope with vulnerability. It is a threat to those whose faith is triumphalistic and victorious. We don’t want the suffering we want the resurrection. I know some churches and healing ministries are all about the resurrection – life is going to be wonderful if you just have faith. If you pray in a certain way, if you believe certain things, do certain things then God will bless you.

There is a tension in our faith between the now and the not yet. The resurrection is the sign of the new age to come when all will be put right. We know from our own testimonies and answers to prayers that remarkable things happen now, we are not without hope in this world, even if our hope may be more secure for the next. We should bring our needs to God and hope for God to be at work, however. But we also have the crucified Christ who endured suffering, who was faithful, if not challenged, through it but who knew the redemptive hope of God in all that journey. So, we can only boast in the Lord.

Human wisdom might look at God’s values, as expressed in the Corinthians readings, and say that they simply don’t work in today’s world – their ‘weakness’ would lead to disaster.

The current emphasis on academic education (and we might note that ‘the academy’ was an expression of Greek wisdom) risks the danger of suggesting that only those who are capable of high-level intellectual activity are strong and valuable. This is exclusive. Micah 6.8 is much more inclusive – you don’t need a degree in theology to do what the Lord requires here.

And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
    and to walk humbly[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=micah+6&version=NIV#fen-NIV-22657a)] with your God.

God will choose the foolish things of this world to shame the strong. The message of the cross may be foolishness to the world but to us it is the power of God.

1. <https://www.premierchristianity.com/Past-Issues/2020/February-2020/What-has-Christianity-ever-done-for-us> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)