

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 08 December 2013

Preacher: Chris Roberts

[0 : 00] If you'd like to turn back in your Bibles to the passage that we read earlier, 1 Corinthians chapter 1 on page 952.!

If you're an arty person, you might remember about four or five years ago, there was a controversy about a new art exhibition that was in a town in Poland.

The problem, however, wasn't with the artwork. It was with the advertisement poster, which was strewn up on a building in the town centre. The poster consisted of a woman wearing a Mickey Mouse mask, and in the background was a giant garish swastika in the colours of the Nazi party. It was particularly shocking because the poster was displayed opposite the local synagogue. A local councillor said, showing this symbol in the city centre is a disgraceful and disgusting thing to do. A swastika displayed on the same street as the local synagogue, merely for the sake of art. Well, it's misguided at best. It's tasteless, isn't it, really?

[1 : 31] It's sick. A disgraceful and disgusting thing to do. But, if you head back to the first century in Corinth, the social equivalent of the symbol of the swastika would have been the symbol of the cross.

It would have been the word about the cross, the instrument of Jesus' death, that the apostle Paul and his partner in the gospel, Sosthenes, has been spreading.

They write to this church at the time in Corinth. And culturally speaking, it was as inappropriate as a Nazi flag flown next to a synagogue.

I wonder whether we've forgotten that slightly in our kind of semi-Christian country and age. But to talk about a man who died on a cross, who was crucified, was the ultimate social faux pas.

You just wouldn't do it. The cross, the symbol wasn't for the jewellery boutiques then, wasn't for the stained glass windows, or the church steeples.

[2 : 46] It was for criminals, for murderers, for the scum of society. It was a symbol of shame. And, you know, it wasn't just the Corinthians who thought that way, who felt that way about the cross.

The Bible itself says in the Old Testament about the shame and disgrace of the cross. So, in Deuteronomy, chapter 21, Moses writes his sermon on the law.

And in chapter 21, it says, If a man has committed a crime punishable by death, so it's pretty serious stuff, isn't it? And you hang him on a tree, his body shall remain all night on the tree.

But you shall bury him the next day, for a hanged man is cursed by God. You shall not defile the land. For Jews and Gentiles, it was a universal symbol of shame and humiliation.

The cross was something to defile the land, not something to be associated with. And yet, when you ask the Apostle Paul, have a look at verse 18 at the end.

[4 : 00] He says, But to us who are being saved, it is the power of God. Many romanticise the cross, don't they? Wayne Rooney has got one tattooed on his back.

But that's not how it was seen then. And more importantly this morning, it's not how it was meant to be seen. It wasn't how it was intended to be seen. The cross, on one level, is an absolute disgrace.

That's the cross of King Jesus. And it was meant to be that way. The disgraceful message of the cross, it isn't simply a shock tactic, like that art gallery in Poland.

It isn't a marketing mistake by God. Have a look at verse 21. Wrong. For since in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God, through the folly of what we preach, that's the message of Jesus' cross, to save those who would believe.

I guess most of us, if we're Christians here, have felt the shame of being associated with Jesus and the cross, haven't we, at times.

[5 : 21] Don't you often find it, it's so easy to talk to friends and neighbours and family who don't know Jesus yet about almost anything. But when the subject of the cross comes up, well, we kind of

clam up, don't we?

The thought that I need somebody to die for my sins. The thought that my king should be somebody who looks so unimpressive.

It sounds like folly to people, doesn't it? Like utter foolishness to our friends and we feel the shame of that message at times.

But verse 21, it pleased God to do it this way. It pleased God that we're given a message, we're given the word of the cross to tell our friends.

God wants it that way, Paul says, to show that he is wise. It is the wisest way of revealing himself and bringing salvation to us.

[6 : 22] So a couple of things that Paul draws out as to why it's wise for God to give us a message about the death on a cross. Firstly, it's his wisdom for those who boast.

It's his wisdom for those who boast. There's always one question that interviewers can ask on TV and on the radio which will be sure to get a reaction and some controversy.

Do you think there is a God? Do you believe there is a God? Woody Allen was asked that question in an interview and he skirted around it. He said, not only is there no God, but try getting a plumber on weekends.

For him, it was a big joke, wasn't it? But even before you start to get answers to that question, it's clear that God is under our microscope in our world.

He's in the dock, as C.S. Lewis said. God is under judgment. God is under examination and the world wants to use all of its powers, all of its powers of deduction, its thinking, its philosophical power, its God-particle science hadron-colliding power, all of its wisdom to consider God.

[7 : 45] And it's the world in its human wisdom who will decide if he exists. It's humans in their wisdom who will search for him.

I'm going on a trip to the east to search for God, some people say, don't they? In their wisdom, reason their way to him. In their wisdom, prove or disprove him.

And it's in their wisdom that they will know him. At the youth group that I went to as a teenager in my old church, there was one of my really good friends there who was somebody a bit like that.

It was good to encourage him to ask lots of questions and we're allowed to do that, aren't we? We should come with questions about the Bible. But it soon got to the point where his questions became the only means through which he was prepared to think about God.

His questions made him stop listening. Maybe he did have a genuine desire to know God, but he would only trust his questions to find him.

[9 : 00] the world trusts in its own wisdom to find God however it wants to. It says to God, what have you got to say for yourself but then it doesn't stick around to listen for the answer.

It is a world of people like the Jews and the Greeks, Paul says, who make demands of God. The Jews, Paul says, verse 22, demanded signs.

They, in their wisdom, think that knowing God is about seeing impressive miracles and remarkable signs. The Greeks, Paul says, seek wisdom.

They want God to be an ideology, to fit in with their philosophical system. We want a God who fits in with the fashions of today, don't we?

Who looks impressive, who fits with our world view, who looks triumphant, who is entertaining, who is all-loving and doesn't hate our bad behaviour, who doesn't care much about sin, who doesn't look weak, who doesn't die surrounded in poverty.

[10 : 12] But God's response is to send us a message, a message which makes it not about me finding God through my systems. It's a message that forces me to lay down my pride in my ability to know God myself.

A message that's nonsense to people who trust in human wisdom. The message of the cross.

Verse 20, Paul says, halfway through, has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

For since in the wisdom of God the world did not know God through wisdom, he asks those who trust in their own systems or wisdom, are you actually getting to know me?

Are you really getting to know me? The real wisdom of the cross is that it's totally different, isn't it, from our usual impressive, miracle-seeking, ideological system search for God.

Without accepting the foolishness of the cross, God says, you will not and you cannot know me.

You will never reason your way to me. You will never debate your way to me.

[11 : 29] You will never create a world view to find me. Until we meet God on his terms, in his message, through the cross, human wisdom, it's blind in its search for God.

That's the wisdom of the cross. It does exactly what it intends to do. It makes the world's wisdom foolish. It renders it useless in the quest to know God.

I'll destroy the wisdom of the wise, the wisdom of the world that boasts over me. I won't be tested. I won't be judged. And those who are doing that will hear the message of the cross and throw it out with the trash and they will never know me.

They will be endlessly frustrated in their search. foolish. A person like that could sit here in this talk and they could sit here week after week listening to the gospel.

But in their wisdom they'll not agree to meet God on his terms. The message of the cross, it will collide with their pride because it looks so tasteless and foolish.

[12 : 39] foolish. God will say to you, well, you cannot know me any other way. The wisdom of the world, it excommunicates itself from God because it looks at the cross and it sees something that is seemingly foolish and tasteless and it fails to know God.

Verse 23, the cross, it's a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles. it will be folly. Where is the one who is wise, he says?

Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? The cross seems disgraceful and disgusting and it sounds foolish and God wants it that way.

He wants it that way to make pride impotent in the search for God, to show you that pride in human wisdom it will never get you to God. So when we're at risk of clamming up about the cross if we're talking to friends and neighbours, we need to remember that the wisdom of the cross is unlike anything the world's wisdom can come close to.

It is so very alien to our friends and neighbours. But that is ultimately what makes it good. It is utterly different to what they think.

[14 : 07] It will be like nothing our friends are hearing or reading about or seeing. And that's why it works. It's the message that forces us to let God out of the microscope and stop trying to know him so foolishly.

So it's a wisdom for those who boast in their own wisdom. wisdom. Secondly though, the cross, the message of the cross, it's his wisdom for those who believe.

It's his wisdom for those who believe. Do you understand how God works, Paul says, to choose weak looking things to make foolish the pride of the world?

Well if you don't see that, another great place to look for an illustration of that is in the mirror. Have a look at verse 26 with me. Consider your calling, brothers.

Not many of you were wise, according to worldly standards. Not many were powerful. Not many were of noble birth. God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise.

[15 : 22] Well it's not a passage for the big headed is it? Now I Jose Mourinho, is he manager of Chelsea now? I think he is, again.

I'm not great on football but I think he's manager of Chelsea. Now he said, didn't he once, that he wanted to take every club in Europe to win the Champions League.

That was his aim by the end of his career. Now I know that some people in this church are keen Brentford FC fans. There's a few of them looking at me right now.

I want to invite you to imagine, no even fantasise that after being sacked from Chelsea for the millionth time, in a shock move to further his glory, Jose Mourinho announces to the press that he's decided to buy a small flat in Brentford and take Brentford FC to Champions League victory.

David Barnes' mouth is watering. Well you can imagine the scene, can't you, in the dressing room after the 3-0 win over Real Madrid in the Champions League final.

[16 : 34] Can you imagine how the opposition would feel after that game? They would feel totally ashamed, wouldn't they? They would feel that small.

The weakness and the inability of the Brentford team would make the Real Madrid performance seem unthinkable empty.

And you see, in the same way, Paul says God chose, verse 28, what is low and despised in the world, to bring to nothing the things that are.

He chose weak people like the Corinthians to shame the worldly wisdom of the day. So, after the match, the players are elated, aren't they?

Congratulating each other on their performance. But then Mourinho walks into the dressing room and he cuts the party atmosphere in half and he says, hang on a minute, don't think that it was you who won that trophy.

[17 : 40] I took you on because I'm the best manager in the world and to prove it, I chose you from the grotty dressing room rooms of Brentford FC. I chose you in all of your tactical and organisational weakness.

I chose you from the depths of Division One. Don't start boasting because you being you in all of your weakness was the perfect ticket for making fools out of them and for showing my glory. glory. So God says to us, just look around the grotty dressing room. Look at the people in your church, look around you this morning.

The weak people, the losers, the foolish people going to church on a Sunday morning. in order to shame the wise, I chose you.

Three times Paul says it, doesn't he, in verses 26 to 28. God chose what is foolish, God chose what is low, God chose what is weak. he chose the cross and the people who in their weakness will mirror its message.

[19 : 04] He chose you in your weakness as a Christian at work, he chose you in your lowness as a Christian, to bring to nothing the things that are.

He chose you in your foolish hope, in a foolish looking cross, to shame the wise of the world. When you think about it, God often chooses, doesn't he, the most inadequate people to be his servants, to do the things that he wants.

Shepherd boys, prostitutes, illegitimate children, eunuchs, the list could go on, couldn't it? The most inadequate people, God chooses to bring revival to entire cities, to heal pagan kings, to establish and grow his church, even to write parts of the Bible.

Carpenters, reluctant evangelists, foul-mouthed fishermen, tax collectors, people like you and me. The sign of somebody who knows God, somebody who is saved by God, is somebody who hears the message of the cross and believes in it.

The sign of the Christian is someone who boasts in the weakness of the cross. And so our weakness is our boast, isn't it?

[20 : 28] Because it goes with the grain of the weakness of the cross. It's radically different from the world's wisdom that seeks power and prestige, and it gets nowhere in its search for God.

Now, don't get me wrong this morning, I'm not saying that the message of the cross doesn't need thinking about and presenting carefully and rationally explaining and even arguing for.

Paul does that so many times, doesn't he? Because the gospel actually is the most rational thing in the world. We're not to lose our minds and become fools in that sense.

But, when we feel like nobodies, when we're not brilliant at apologetics, it does not make us bad at evangelism.

What does he say? Consider your calling. Think about how weak you are. Think about how powerless you really are.

[21 : 33] Think about that. And know that God chose that. It's an assurance, isn't it, to us for the next time as a church, we're tempted to present God, merely as a God who fits in with what people want him to be, rather than the God who he reveals himself as.

We can allow ourselves as a church to talk about the cross. Next time we feel the burden of presenting ourselves to fit with the world's agenda, we can allow ourselves to be weak, just like the cross.

The cross, it still feels tasteless, doesn't it? Even now, it still feels foolish. Why on earth should you bring your friends and family and colleagues to hear such a message?

It's bananas, isn't it? And if only you weren't so pathetic in your faith, if only you weren't so weak.

But remember, God chose what is weak to shame the strong.

God chose what is despised. He chose what looks foolish to shame the wise. And didn't he really, really choose that when he came that first Christmas to lie in a wooden cradle to then die on a wooden cross?

[23 : 06] As we come to Christmas, we're looking at the ultimate display of weakness, aren't we? And of foolishness when God chooses the vulnerability of a human body.

When people come to the carol services next week and the week after, what will humble them and lead them to faith is not a God who lords it over them in pomp, but it's a God who becomes weak

who becomes a servant.

As Augustine says, the only thing to destroy the pride of man is the humility of God. The only thing to destroy the pride of man is the humility of God.

The foolish message of the cross, God chose it. And the foolish man who loves it, foolish woman who relishes it and hopes in it and is saved by it.

God chose you. The cross is God's chosen message to display his wisdom to those who boast and for those weak people who believe.

[24 : 19] It's his chosen message, a weak message, and nothing else will do it. So if you want to be popular at work or at school with your colleagues, well, it's easy, isn't it?

Talk about the cross. If you want to go far in the world, well, that's easy. Don't admit your weakness.

Don't talk about the cross. Of course, that won't get you very far, will it? The cross won't get you very far in this world. That's not wise in the world's eyes.

But where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

Let's pray.