

HOME RETREAT SATURDAY 6 MARCH 2021

WE PREACH A CRUCIFIED CHRIST

Opening prayer

Lord God, open the ear of my heart to hear your Word, to be captivated by the sight of your beauty and to dwell in the joy of your truth, grant this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Mary, seat of wisdom, pray for us.

Good morning and welcome to this home retreat; I am very pleased to be with you.

I would like to take for this retreat the second reading from tomorrow's Mass for the Third Sunday in Lent and to share with you some thoughts occurring to me from it.

It comes from the First Letter of St Paul to the Christians in Corinth, chapter 1, verses 22 to 25. Let me read it:

While the Jews demand miracles and the Greeks look for wisdom, here are we preaching a crucified Christ; to the Jews an obstacle that they cannot get over, to the pagans madness, but to those who have been called, whether they are Jews or Greeks, a Christ who is the power and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

Well, I would not have chosen this passage, if I did not think it is a compelling and powerful one, as is the whole of the first two chapters of this letter by Paul to the Corinthians. If what I say this morning were to prompt you to read the whole of these two chapters, then I think that would be a good outcome, though I am also going to make some other suggestions for a retreat follow up, at the end of this short talk.

The passage I have read begins with a distinction between Jews and Greeks, 'Greeks' being a word often used in the New Testament to describe non-Jews or Gentiles, and it says that Jews demand miracles while Greeks look for wisdom. The Old Testament has its share of miracles or signs, perhaps the most famous being the rescue of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, the mighty parting and the people's crossing of the Red Sea. By contrast Greeks, famous for philosophy and for great thinkers, such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, did not so much think of an interventionist God, indeed they were inclined to scoff at the idea, but they looked

for a God who was the source of a higher wisdom, above our crude material world.

St Paul places himself in tension with both Jews and Greeks, for while the former want signs and the latter want wisdom 'here are we', he says. This is the apostolic calling. It is a very characteristic phrase of Paul: 'here are we'. He expands on it a couple of chapters further on in 1 Corinthians, saying that the apostles have been put on display, at the end of a procession, fools for Christ's sake, the dregs of the world, the very lowest scum' (see 1 Corinthians 4:9-13).

This is the apostolic calling, let us remember, the dregs of the world and the very lowest scum. And it is, St Paul continues, because, to return to our focus passage this morning, 'here are we, preaching a crucified Christ'. This is the apostolic word following the apostolic calling, the preaching of the Cross. This brings us to St Paul's main point in this short passage. For he says, the proclaiming of the Cross, the preaching of a crucified Christ, a crucified Messiah, strikes the Jews as an obstacle that they cannot get over and the Greeks, the philosophers, as madness.

It is an obstacle to Jews, more than this a terrible piece of blasphemy. In the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 21 verse 23, it is said 'cursed is anyone hanged on a tree' and indeed Paul quotes this in his letter to the Galatians, chapter 3 verse 13. God guarantees for those who have his favour, success not failure, life not a shameful death. God's Messiah cannot be subjected to the death of the Cross. It is bad enough to think of God lowering himself to become incarnate in a human body, worse by far for him to undergo the death of the cross. As they cry at the cross, if he is the Messiah he should come down from it.

While the Jewish view sees that it is possible for God to intervene in at least some sort of way by means of a sign or miracle in the world, only not in a shameful way, for the Greek / Gentile / philosophical mentality the whole idea of a God intervening in any such way, is simply absurd – so Paul says of this gospel of the cross 'to the pagans it is madness'. We may recall that in the book of Acts, when Paul preaches in Athens about the resurrection of Christ (Acts chapter 17, verses 16 to 34) he is greeted by howls of laughter. Derision echoing down the centuries.

And yet. This is another favourite phrase of Paul, like 'here we are' only in our translation it is the simple forceful 'but'. The gospel of the cross is a stumbling block to the Jews and ludicrous to the Greeks, but to those who have been called, whether they are Jews or Greeks, a Christ who is the power and the wisdom of God'. The Cross looks like unacceptable weakness and preaching it derisory madness, but it is in fact the power and the wisdom of God and so – St Paul clearly loves this paradox, it turns out in fact that this foolishness, madness,

weakness, blasphemy as it seems to be of God, is in fact 'wiser than human wisdom' and 'stronger than human strength'.

Well these are maybe fine and rhetorical phrases of St Paul, but can and should we believe them? Two thoughts about this.

St Paul uses the little phrase 'to those who have been called'. It is those who have been called, who can see in the gospel of the Cross, of the crucified Messiah, the 'power and the wisdom of God'. We are called to faith and this opens the mysterious giftedness of faith – the notion, many of you will be familiar with it, that faith is a gift. Given to some and not others: how well do we know this, indeed it may be in our families and among our friends, given to some, not to others. In a time when I was in St Benet's in Oxford, there was a graduate student, who said that she simply did not have the God-gene. And for ourselves too there will be plenty of times, now may be one of them for you, when faith seems fragile and at low-tide. I always find very moving the plea of the disciples, recorded in St Luke chapter 17 verse 5: 'increase our faith' and Jesus' response does not lack for challenge: 'If you had faith the size of a mustard seed you could say to this mulberry tree, "Be uprooted and planted in the sea," and it would obey you'. In St Matthew's version it is a mountain not a tree. Well either way, this is likely going to keep most of us praying for an increase in our faith, our whole lives long.

My second thought on whether we can and should believe that God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength, will lead me to the last part of this reflection.

Obviously, St Paul's words are highly paradoxical and are signalling, another phrase of St Paul's 'a mystery'. Their truth is not to be accessed, to be grasped, as by a knockdown argument. They are not riddles to be solved, even if the wording might suggest so, but they are rather truths to be prayed and lived, in the gritty experience of our life we may yet learn the truth of them.

Cardinal Basil Hume in one of his teachings on prayer, noting how at times we come to prayer very tired, and hardly seem to be able to collect any thoughts, shared that at such times, which he admitted were quite frequent in his life, he would simply sit and look at the crucifix. This can be found in a number of places in his books and there is a collection of his works on the cross published ten years after his death called *Hope from the Cross*. Sitting and looking at the Cross, without too many conscious thoughts, can activate at a deeper level than our normal human seeing and thinking, insights below the level of our everyday consciousness and not necessarily things that can be put into words. The wisdom and power of the cross takes us to a level deeper than the surface of our lives. So just sit and look at the crucifix.

Another possibility is to take this short passage from St Paul that I have been looking at for your own lectio divina, that is for your own prayerful reading. Part of this can be to understand the meaning of the passage, for which this talk of mine may or may not be a help, but more importantly it is to see what memories, resonances, echoes the passage triggers from your own story, your own experiences, where you seem to be now in your life. Then gently in an unforced sort of way turn these memories, resonances, echoes into prayer. This prayer may be in words, but it may be difficult to put it exactly into words and then in fact you have reached to a deeper wordless form of prayer, which will shape your life, in more ways than you can know in the wisdom and the strength of God. So take the passage and turn it into your prayer, prayer for you, whatever that may be.

Then lastly, if your mind is a bit alert and stimulated and jumpy, you could do what is sometimes known as a ‘scrutinizing lectio’ that is to follow up words in the passage that you are reading. I have done this this morning with my cross referencing to other passages in the Bible. If you have a verse roughly in your mind, you will find often enough that Google can lead you to where the verse comes from, because it can be at least at times a clever tool. If you are just interested in or only have one particular word, then by just putting ‘concordance’ into Google you can find tools that enable you to find out all the uses of that word in the Bible. To be sure the internet has its dangers, do we not know, but it is possible to pray with paper and pen in hand and on one’s computer. God can lead you through this sort of lectio to some unexpected, fruitful and even some wonderful places. You may well be able to do better than me and of course what God wants for you is always for you the best thing. This is my third suggestion.

So I leave you with this, by returning to the nub of the passage I have taken: ‘but to those who have been called ... a Christ who is the power and the wisdom of God’.

And a concluding prayer

Lord God, I pray that contemplating the cross of your beloved Son, I may come to believe more deeply and to know more surely your truth, your guidance, your love in my life; may I bring my sufferings and sorrows to your cross and find them now and in the hour of my death transformed by your resurrection into light and peace, joy and glory; through the same Christ our Lord. Amen

Mary, seat of wisdom, pray for us.