



1 Corinthians 2.1-9
Matthew 5.13-16
5th February 2023

**Christ crucified is not WHAT Paul sees,
 but HOW he sees.**

Gracious God, we thank you for your word in scripture and made flesh in the Lord Jesus Christ. Help us now to catch your voice and speak, we pray, to our hearts and minds. In Jesus' name. Amen.

I love going round museums that have recreated a kitchen, say from the 1890's, and taking a peep at what they've displayed in the pantry. Although most of the packets of ingredients may be unfamiliar, I mean I suspect we use lard and carbolic soap less than we used to, I'm struck by brands that have stood the march of time and are still recognisable, like that tin of Oxo or Coleman's powder. Even the Birds Custard packet wouldn't look out of place in the new Manse kitchen. These companies haven't changed their branding in decades and the colours and logos they use have become, over the years, an integral part of their identity.

Now, if I were in advertising today, I'm not sure that the cross, a symbol of execution, would be my first choice as the main logo of the Church. It would be interesting to see what we'd come up with as an alternative.

Yet the cross is now synonymous with Christianity, we might even consider it to be a triumph of advertising, and is the emblem found in the majority of our churches. Indeed, I was speaking to a couple just the other week who were mystified why a newly built church had a sound system, projection screen and the best comfy seats in town but not a cross.

In our reading today from 1 Corinthians 2, Paul introduces himself to his readers as a person who *would not claim to know anything but Jesus Christ - Christ nailed to a cross.*

Maybe it's easy for us to take the cross for granted. It's so much part of the culture of Christianity that we don't give it as much thought as it deserves. So, let's focus on it this morning.

On Good Friday there is something of a battle going on around the cross; there's a collision between two fundamentally opposed value systems.

Crucifixion was a brutal and barbaric way to silence a voice and cancel a message. Jesus was neither the first nor the last to be crucified. Crucifixion had been practiced by the Romans for 200 years before his and would be enforced for a further 300 years until Constantine I abolished it.

It was essentially a punishment for those whose crimes were against the State. Disgraced soldiers were often crucified, slaves who rose up against the system, foreigners who didn't submit to Rome's ways and of course, after Jesus, many Christians were crucified because they refused to worship at the shrine of the Emperor.

At school, in our history lessons, we were often told about the *Pax Romana*, the peace Rome brought to the Mediterranean world, yet that was often at a price.

We sing, rather romantically, of a *Green Hill Far Away*, yet the reality was this was a brutal, crossroads sort of place. One road represented power, the other compassion. And on that first Good Friday things collided, and maybe they have been in collision ever since when strength tops weakness, when money speaks louder than poverty and when convenience wins over integrity.

I have no idea what it must be like to fight in battle. But I suspect, say in the trenches of Flanders, no sight was more reassuring than a van arriving with a red cross painted on its side.

And maybe that also felt a bit like two worlds colliding, one of might and force, the other of love and assistance. There on the battlefield soldiers faced the worst life could throw at them, our human propensity for self-destruction. Yet even at this bleakest of times, the human propensity for compassion was also seen by those wearing a red cross.

Now, in today's reading from Corinthians, it isn't actually the cross that Paul sees, but how does he put it: *Christ nailed to the cross*.

And this will be the controversial bit of the sermon for all us Non-Conformists out there!

Because I'm not sure, at least from this passage of scripture, that Paul would approve of an empty cross in a church because maybe he'd say that, theologically, haven't we missed the point? It's not the cross that is central, but the Christ upon it.

Now, of course, I've grown up with the reasoning that places the cross along side the tomb, which says both are empty. But let's just linger with this thought for a

little.

It's Jesus, upon the cross, that Paul sees as the Wisdom of God. It might make little sense to philosophies of power or success, but Paul has just written in the second half of 1 Corinthians 1 that the wisdom of God is seen as Jesus dies upon the cross.

Of course, many voices called for Jesus' death on Good Friday in the square outside Pilate's palace. That cacophony blended the shouts of civic and religious leaders alongside traditionalists who thought Jesus had done too much and zealots who believed he hadn't done enough. It's left hanging in the air if Judas Iscariot, a much loved and trusted disciple, didn't betray Jesus for 30 pieces of silver as a last desperate act seeking to force his hand and make him into the liberating, force using Messiah many were hoping for.

So, again and again as we work our way through Matthew's gospel this church year, a constant theme will be *Who is this Jesus?* What sort of servant and what kind of leader is Jesus from Nazareth? Indeed, Jesus himself will ask his followers: *Who do you say that I am?*

And if the answer comes back: *You came to free us from the Romans and show our oppressors who is in control.* Then, the cross is a symbol of failure and the result of a mistaken mission.

But that's not what Paul is saying. He says: *I would not claim to know anything but Jesus Christ – Christ nailed to the cross.*

For Paul the cross represents the wisdom of God, the God who came alongside the marginalised, healed the sick and taught forgiveness.

For Paul the cross was not a mistake or a failure, instead it speaks of cross shaped grace.

Not that any of this is easy and even Jesus uttered a cry of dereliction from Calvary.

The one who died upon the cross stood for self-sacrificing love, he spoke words of forgiveness and pointed to a deeper and more compassionate way of life. It's the very essence of God. And it is expressed in the gift that is Jesus. A life given in love; a death offered with integrity.

But living, and dying, like this isn't easy and never has been.

Perhaps like me you really appreciate that terrifying, yet wonderful, picture from the Jewish scriptures of a Fiery Furnace, stoked up by a tyrannical king, Nebuchadnezzar, into which Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were thrown

because they prayed to God rather than the king.

As if to answer that eternal question: *Where is God at times of suffering* the book of Daniel says there was a fourth figure that seemed to be in the furnace, walking alongside the others and sharing their pain, one like the Son of God.

An old story proclaiming an eternal truth: God walks with us when we suffer.

The God of the Fiery Furnace, the God of Good Friday's cross.

As one of my favourite Bible commentators, Bill Loader writes: *Paul asserts a new kind of wisdom, the foolishness and powerlessness of the cross. The life poured out there is not the sign of God's absence but God's presence.*

Now I want to end this short reflection about the cross, based on 1 Corinthians 2, this morning with this thought. It isn't my own, so I just pass it on to you, but it's one I find so helpful and it comes from the writing of an American Lutheran Minister, Mary Hinkle Shore, and she simply says this: *Christ crucified is not WHAT Paul sees, but HOW he sees.*

And she expands that thought with this illustration based on when we go to get our eyes checked out at the opticians. I think things are moving on a bit now, but in the old days do you remember those empty frames placed on our noses into which the optometrist would place lenses of various strengths, turning and combining them till we got to our prescription. At first everything would be blurred, we didn't see clearly, but with the right lens, things come into focus.

Mary Hinkle Shore says that's what the cross does for us. It becomes a sort of lens through which we see the whole world and the whole of life, as God sees it. It's those cross shaped attributes of love, service, forgiveness, patience, kindness, reconciliation, and faithfulness that brings the world into a true focus

And this, says Paul, is how we know the mind of Christ, as we look at all of life, through the lens of the cross.

May God bless you in your looking, in the name of our Creator, Saviour and Sustainer, Amen.

Ian Green, Amersham, 3rd February 2023