

**+ 1 Corinthians 1:20-25 + We Preach the Wisdom of the Cross of Christ +
+ Ash Wednesday + 17 February 2010 +**

A pastor makes the sign of the cross as he announces the forgiveness of sins to waiting worshipers. A cross of ash is placed on a Christian's forehead. A cross occupies the central place on a church's altar. A rough, wooden cross stands prominently before the eyes of God's people. A lighted cross stands atop a church for all to see. A crucifix—a cross with a depiction of the body of Christ—hangs on a wall in a bedroom. A small cross hangs from a gold necklace around a person's neck.

So many crosses in so many places depicted in so many ways—ornate, simple, metal, wood, crucifixes, and empty. Centuries ago the cross was simply seen as an instrument of torture and death. Today many see it as an object of superstition like a rabbit's foot or four-leaf clover. Still many more see it as offensive as a constant reminder of blood and death. For many, the cross is absolute foolishness. How could a holy and almighty God bear the guilt and punishment of death for the sins of those who offended him most—his creatures—and then give them all the benefits for free, no strings attached? Based on sinful human reason and logic and knowledge, the cross and what happened there is simply nonsense.

Then St. Paul comes along in 1 Corinthians 1 and shatters all that logic and worldly wisdom with the cross of Christ. There Paul solves the mystery of the foolishness and offense of what God accomplished on that cross. You see, for the believing child of God, the cross is absolute wisdom. There in the foolishness of the cross we find God's wisdom and comfort in the sure promise of the forgiveness of our sins and escape from the hell our rebellion deserves. Therefore, ***"we preach Christ crucified!"*** As we begin another 40-day Lenten journey focused on the cross of Christ, we need to remember that **WE PREACH THE WISDOM OF THE CROSS OF CHRIST!**

"Greeks look for wisdom." Corinth was a popular haven for "wisdom seekers" and seeking the latest "wisdom" was a popular lifestyle in ancient Greece. People placed great stock in the "wisdom" of men like Socrates and Plato. On a visit to Athens, Paul had encountered this "wisdom" lifestyle, when the men on Mars Hill met to hear his "new teaching". These men spent their days just discussing the latest ideas, but when Paul preached Christ Crucified it was ***"foolishness to the Gentiles."*** To those who thought they were "wise," the idea of a Savior who died a slave's death was absolute nonsense. You can hear them asking, "How can a divine being die?" or "I'm a Gentile, why should I go to a Jew for salvation?" To the unbelieving Gentiles, the message of Christ Crucified was utter foolishness. ***"Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?"***

It was no different for those who surrounded Jesus. ***"Where is the wise man?"*** Pontius Pilate, the savvy politician that he was, saw Jesus' claim to be king as a foolish distraction from his life's ambitions. As he stared into the face of him who is the truth, Pilate arrogantly asked, ***"What is truth?"*** In spite of the dire warnings of his wife, the seasoned politician sold his soul to please the mob and gain himself some short-term political favor. ***"Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?"***

"Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age?" Scholars store up knowledge and philosophers draw on their intellect to speculate about God and man and the universe, but both depend on fallen human intelligence. Is it any surprise that none of the great man-made religions offer a sure confidence of salvation? When confronted with Jesus of Nazareth, Caiaphas, the high priest, could not allow the possibility that Jesus was the Messiah. The forgiveness of sins could not be achieved by a mere man like Jesus. The best Caiaphas could hope for was the survival of Israel as a nation. Plumbing the depths of his sinful mind, Caiaphas was quite sure he was doing God a favor by condemning Jesus to death: ***"It is better that one man die than that the nation perish."*** ***"Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?"***

"Jews demand miraculous signs." Herod had been waiting so long to see Jesus. He hoped to see Jesus show off his power, but Jesus didn't even utter a word. After all, none of the Jews were convinced by Jesus' other miracles: the miraculous feedings, the casting out of demons, the healing of lifelong illnesses, or the raising of Lazarus from the dead. They had expected the Messiah to perform miraculous signs, but Jesus didn't come through for them and restore physical Israel with a world empire. They didn't expect a condemned and crucified and dying Messiah. To the Jews, then, the cross of Christ was weak and offensive. ***"Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?"***

This message is utter foolishness to our world too. The cross of Christ just doesn't make sense to most people. "How could some guy who died 2000 years ago save me now?" "Can God punish all sin and forgive all sin at the same time with no strings attached?"

Now every one of us is naturally inclined to think he or she has to do something to be saved. Just look at the smorgasbord of religions out there that offer many possible roads to heaven paved by your own works. Others put their trust in the wonders of science or humanity's ability to accomplish anything. Even more people just don't want a reasonable message. They prefer to chase after any message that pleases their sinful desires or makes them feel good, but what do such messages accomplish? Absolutely nothing. They only lead down the horrible path to destruction in hell.

We, too, can fall into this trap. Maybe everything in life seems to be going wrong. We may wonder, "What good is this message when my loved one is suffering from a serious health problem?" "What good can this message do when there are threats of war, disease and a slow economy all around us?" Maybe things are going so well we think we're in control and don't need help. We're confident in our own abilities. We don't need any help from a Savior who died long ago. At times like that the cross of Christ may even appear foolish to us as it did to the Greeks and Pilate and Caiaphas and Herod.

...But we preach the wisdom of the cross of Christ. ***"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...we preach Christ crucified...foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called...the wisdom of God."*** This message is not a "senseless" plan, but the greatest wisdom of all. The wisdom of the cross is in its simplicity. We don't have to do anything to be saved. We were dead in our sins, so Jesus did everything for us.

Jesus lived a perfect life. He allowed his enemies to harass and beat him. He allowed them to pound nails into his hands and feet and hang him on a cross. He suffered the pains of hell we deserve. He willingly sacrificed himself on that cross, so we could live. Yes, us—poor, sinful human beings who don't deserve anything but eternal death in hell. There on that cross, God laid all the punishment for sins on his holy, innocent Son. On that cross God treated his sinless Son as we sinners should have been treated. From that cross the perfect mercy and love of God came to us poor sinners. Through the cross of Christ, God treated rebels, like you and me, as only his holy Son deserved! From that cross, then, Jesus sealed his victory on the third day, when he left the tomb empty as our risen Savior. He forgave those sins of ours and made us alive through faith. That is the wisdom of the cross of Christ—foolishness to the world, but in reality the wisdom of God.

Armed with the wisdom that we are God's dear children through the cross of Christ, we can face any adversity of life or death. Daily each of us must wrestle with our own struggle with sin and an evil conscience. Whenever our hearts condemn us, the wisdom of the cross says, ***"It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?"***

Every day the Holy Spirit breaks through dead hearts and creates faith simply through that wisdom of the cross. In times of weakness, Christ strengthens us with his wisdom as he told St. Paul in 2 Corinthians 12, ***"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."*** The wisdom of the cross is a never-ending fount of spiritual strength. Just look at believers who struggled physically and spiritually throughout their lives—believers like Martin Luther, who suffered deep depression, but Christ Crucified always brought him back. St. Paul suffered persecution, imprisonment, rejection, and finally death, but he was always strengthened by Christ Crucified. Look at your own life. What hope do you have when everything seems to fall apart? What joy do you have when life doesn't make sense? You have the wisdom of the cross of Christ.

When death approaches, the wisdom and power of the cross lift our eyes to the Lord's mercy and compassion that guarantee us safe passage to our heavenly home. Together with the apostle Paul, then, we can stake our eternal happiness on that wisdom of the cross of Christ: ***"In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."*** Amen.