

Cross in Corinth

1 Corinthians 1:18-2:9

In Paul's letters, there are four dimensions to his understanding of the cross, and at best, we only ever refer to one of them.

The one which we will know the best, although I still think we spend far too little time thinking about it, is the idea of cross as "Atoning Sacrifice" - the place where God brought all the sin of the world, Jesus bore the punishment for it, paid the price for it, and those brought forgiveness, of justification to all who have faith.

This is the idea of the cross going on when Paul talks about Christ dying "for us" or "for our sins".

The most concise statement of this probably in Romans 3:22-25

22 This righteousness is given through faith in[a] Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. 25 God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement,[b] through the shedding of his blood – to be received by faith.

In this Paul is fighting the idea that Christ's justification is obtained in anyway, especially obedience to the law, it is a gift of faith.

The next key idea, and one we forget about too often, is the that we were "Crucified with" Christ and "Raised with Christ", this is even stronger in the Greek where Paul says we were "Syn-crucified" with Christ. Paul uses this particularly strongly when counteracting the idea that we can just get forgiven, get the stamp, and it doesn't really matter how badly we behave afterwards. Indeed, there were some who were concerned the logic of the first dimension was that you should sin more, because the more you sinned, the more forgiveness there would be.

A classing passage that gives us this understanding is in Romans 6:1-6

6 What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning, so that grace may increase? 2 By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? 3 Or don't you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? 4 We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. 5 For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. 6 For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with,[a] that we should no longer be slaves to sin

The third idea, which is found in Colossians, is the idea that Jesus defeated all the forces of darkness, and all the powers...

So you have this passage in Colossians 2:15

"He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it"

Now actually this idea has more of a link with understanding one than you think, because for Paul, obedience to the law, is in fact obedience to a power, a spiritual power.

And the fourth understanding, which is the idea that we are going to be addressing today, because it is so critical to understanding the letter to the Corinthians, is the idea that because Jesus came in the lowest status position of the world - he came as a servant, because he died the most shameful of deaths - crucifixion - what he did was he demonstrated that human categories of status and shame are utterly meaningless - because if God can take the part of a servant, and God is the most glorious being there is and do the thing the world in its hierarchies thinks is the least, then the idea that being a servant makes you less, or that you should aspire to be the kind of person who has servants and then feels superior to them is utterly ridiculous.

But also the way that Paul writes, is that there is some kind of dark structure, some kind of dark force, even a ruler or authority, or a spiritual power, which whispers in our ear -

"Get ahead,
Get ahead
Be better
Be better
Be respected
Be respected"

There is a huge connection with the idea of powers, the third understanding.

And there is a huge connection with the teaching of Jesus who told us that the last will be first and the first will be last.

And we have forgotten this key dimension, and so we have played a game where we play status and gospel - we do as well as we can, we get the best jobs, the best car, the most respectable lifestyle choices, and we live comfortably, and to add to all that we also got respectability and forgiveness. In Northern Ireland they had a word for it, they said that if you did the right things, and got respect for it you were "Good livin'"

And we have forgotten this idea, that you can get ahead, and chase success and have these as life goals as a Christian, there is something profoundly cross shaped to the world where these do not matter any more.

We are not to impress people with our strength - we are to let God be seen in our weakness

We are not to impress people with our cleverness - we are to allow God to make us appear fools

We are not to Lord our noble birth - we are rejoice that God would have chosen the likes of us.

Sometimes I think we even want the Church to be like this - the Church has successful business, building up its numbers, impressing with our story. You have to realise how seductive all of these are, and to the voice seduction, Paul says another word - the word of the cross.

So let us look at 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:9 and see how this plays out...

18 For the message/word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

To those who are being saved, the message of the cross is the power of God...

Note here that the contrast is not between

One form of human wisdom - be that Greek philosophy, or Jewish law
And another form of human wisdom - Paul's doctrine of the atonement

It isn't that Paul has come up with a better philosophical system, or to borrow a phrase sometimes used in American apologetics - a better worldview.

One is about a human system
And one is about God's power.

Faith is the total reliance on God's power, and doing away with all the insurance policies and backups that we have on the go.

And it is foolishness, it is madness - it is the foolishness of the missionary giving up a career, like the great cricketer CT Studd going off to be a missionary.

Though I have a great trust in Messrs Coutts and Co, I have greater bankers still, they are called the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and I will be trusting myself to their treasure.

But also, something in the way act we live against the value systems of the world, we fundamentally reject its assumptions.

I think of the way that our friend Anna says that she used to be laughed at for her environmentalism, which is rooted in her faith - an environmentalism which calls seriously into question our consumerism and values.

19 For it is written:

'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise;

the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.'[a]

20 Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

21 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.

There are two things here...

Firstly - that Paul is not criticising all wisdom or all philosophy here, seems to be the understanding of most scholars. Firstly because Paul himself uses the arguments and style of philosophy....

But what seems to be in view here is a form of philosophy which has emptied God out, or sought take the place of God.

Philosopher of this age - verse 20

Wisdom of the world - verse 20

So science is a beautiful pursuit, the pursuit of knowledge and understanding the beauty of the world

But when science becomes the wisdom of this this age, when it become scientism, the idea that science is all, as you sometimes get the impression of when you hear Richard Dawkins speak, then it is highly problematic, in fact it is destroyed by the word of the Cross.

Or evolution, is the best theory that science has, with much supporting evidence, for the origin of life (I would of course say that it is God inspired, and of course evolution does not replace creation, it presupposes it); but social darwinism or eugenics the idea that the fittest should survive and the weakest discarded is an utterly appalling philosophy, this wisdom of the world is destroyed by the word of the cross.

Or critical theory which looks at the structures of inequality, the way that is supported by exclusive language is very important for listening to the voice of those on the margins and charting the shape of oppression - but when it becomes a language game, a totalising religion then it is a problematic wisdom of the world, and it is destroyed by the word of the cross.

Or some form of free market economics does seem to be the best way of organising an economy - encouraging entrepreneurship and creating jobs - but when it becomes consumer capitalism endlessly pursuing product and consumption and destroying the planet with scandalous inequality, then it becomes a wisdom of this world, and is destroyed by the word of the cross.

When each of these philosophies denies God, when they attempt to become total, then God will thwart them, and leave them foolish with God's wisdom.

When each of these becomes a form of being impressive, of getting ahead, then they become a wisdom of the world, and are antithetical to the incredible trust and deep weakness and humility of the cross.

And so Paul introduces this word, despite all its problems to the people of this day - the Greeks and the Jews.

22 Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, 23 but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24 but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

Most commentators do not think there is a problem with Jews looking for some kind of sign, and the Greeks are not wrong in looking for wisdom.

But when the underlying assumptions of these systems..are about strength, power, getting ahead, shutting out those who haven't made it, then the word of the cross destroys them.

For the Jewish law, it is a form of righteousness which looks like quid pro quo
And contains the line that you are cursed if you died on a tree
And if that fundamentally disturbs your notion of the rightness of God,
Then the cross will expose that system
And all religious systems which are essentially good living
Including many Christian ones
The God who must be appeased by our performance
Such words are destroyed by the word of the cross.
Rather than the God for whom in faith we accept the gift of radical all forgiving grace.

And for the Greeks, there is nothing wrong with enquiry and attempting to being wise
But when that becomes intellectual snobbery, or contempt for those who have not shown themselves as clever, or faddism or fails to see God's radical alignment with the broken and marginalised for this world.

Then the cross is a stumbling block, a scandal to Jews

That God should become sin, not chase purity
And creates a community where the purity codes are gone
That is a scandal

And the idea that a God should give up the pursuit of wealth, status, power, birth, rank
That is foolish.

And our gospel is not enough of stumbling block to those who believe in performance
religion, or grace is not radical enough

And our gospel is not foolish enough to those who believe in getting ahead, and
amassing cleverness and strength.

And when you realise this,
The most remarkable miracle happens
You gather round yourself a community where status no longer matters
And barriers of the world are broken down by the word of the cross.

Cherishing our Failures

26 Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. 28 God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are, 29 so that no one may boast before him. 30 It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. 31 Therefore, as it is written: ‘Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.’

Too often the Christian story looks like a form of personal success
This is always a counterfeit gospel

It is in our failure that God might use us this most
The career that didn't take off
The family life that is far from perfect
The big mistake that we made

When we come alongside others, our success is a barrier
And our weakness, I have seen this happen too many times, where my brokenness almost
allows a flow into another
I have seen and felt it too often.

And we need to stop playing the game
It happens all the time

Apparently at the Queen's service in St Giles there was a jostling for tickets, I would imagine the same at Westminster Abbey.

Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord

Is there something in your life which you are quite pleased with yourself about
May God deal with it
May God deal with it, even if that hurts
As Richard Rohr prays each day, Oh Lord, give me a humiliation today.

Because if we are going to boast, the only boast we can have is in the Lord.

2 And so it was with me, brothers and sisters. When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. [c] 2 For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. 3 I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. 4 My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, 5 so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power.

There is something else we need to address here.

We want our Church to be a success
I sometimes feel the burden of it on me
Make us successful
Be our saviour

And put the burden onto myself.

What if it were our weakness
What if it were the fact our services weren't honest but we were perfect
What if it were the case that in weakness and folly, God came and spoke and changed lives
What if we went downmarket and resisted the lure of numbers? The lure of quantity...

6 We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. 7 No, we declare God's wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. 8 None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. 9 However, as it is written:

*'What no eye has seen,
what no ear has heard,
and what no human mind has conceived'[d] –
the things God has prepared for those who love him –*

And I want to say something about the Queen's funeral...

I loved the Queen
I really loved her

And I agree with the Bible that we need rulers and governments to provide stability and for most of the Bible's life that didn't mean a democratically elected head of state, that meant some form of hereditary monarchy.

But - we should never celebrate rank, or privilege, or cautiously royalty as a state in itself, we must not be seduced by rank or privilege.

Yes, for a funeral it must be done in a way which is full of beauty and music and dignity
And then the very next day it must all go back into the box, because we can never be seduced by such things.

The Queen herself knew that... she lived with humility - she loved to clean a barbecue table with marigold gloves even if a certain prime minister was outraged and thought that beneath her.

Remember it was the rulers of this world who understood this message of God,
And so they crucified the Messiah.

Oscar Romero of El Salvador, was appointed Archbishop of San Salvador, the senior position in the Catholic Church in El Salvador, he was seen as a social conservative.

However he was deeply disturbed by the murder of his friend and fellow Priest, Rutilio Grande- he rejected forms of theology which saw salvation and liberation purely in material terms - what Paul might have called the wisdom of the world - but did believe in true holistic liberation for all the people.

He said to his people "aspire not to have more, but to be more"

Or "We know that every effort to improved society, above all when society is so full of injustice and sin, is an effort that God blesses, that God wants, that God demands of us."

Or "Many people would like the poor to always say that it is God's will that they are poor, it is not God's will for some people to have nothing and some people to have everything"

And he spoke against the ruler and authorities, he called for members of the El Salvador police and army who were Christians to consider that it was not God's will that they carry out killings, to obey God's commands and not violate human rights.

On 24th March, he was assassinated at a hospital chapel shortly after saying mass.

But he saw the power of the gospel in all its dimensions
That it is about the removal of sin
It is about the crucifixion of self
It is about the disarming of the powers
And it is about the destruction of all powers of status, rank, cleverness or birth

This is the gospel
This is the gospel, the word of the cross
Let us listen
And let us be converted

AMEN