

The Foolish Wisdom of the Cross  
 WE PREACH CHRIST CRUCIFIED  
 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

David R. Clark

10-957LW

February 17, 2010

Ash Wednesday

*<sup>18</sup> For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. <sup>19</sup> For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate."<sup>20</sup> Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? <sup>21</sup> 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. <sup>22</sup> Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, <sup>23</sup> but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, <sup>24</sup> but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. <sup>25</sup> For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.*

Dear brothers and sisters of the cross,

Have you ever heard someone make this case against God: "If God is almighty, can he create a stone that is too heavy for him to carry?" How very clever! The creature seems to have outwitted the Creator.

But for those who have been enlightened by the Holy Spirit, such seeming contradictions are nothing new. God even has a name for them: "mysteries of the faith." Give us a few moments, and we can add a whole list of impossibilities to the one just mentioned:

- How can Jesus be born in time (Lk 2) and still be "the Lord" who has no beginning or end (Lk 2:11)?
- How can Jesus fill the entire universe (2 Ch 6:18) and lie in a manger (Lk 2:12) at the same time?

Or, more to the point of our Lenten pilgrimage:

- How can God be immortal (1 Ti 6:16) and at the same time die on the cross (Mark 15:37)?

We have learned to be at peace with these and a thousand other apparent contradictions in the Bible, not because we check our brains at the door when we walk into church but because of a God whose ways are not our ways and whose thoughts are so superior to our thoughts that, without Spirit-given faith in the Holy Scriptures, it would all be nonsense.

1

**"For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing. . . . Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolishness the wisdom of this world?"**

During our commemoration of the Lord's 40-day fast, we see how the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ solves this mystery. Here, 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.

At times we will find our puny, fleshly wisdom to be the foolishness reflected in those who surrounded our Savior. For instance:

**"Where is the wise man?"** Pontius Pilate showed his wisdom. He declared Jesus free of any blame, but chose to be muddled by the petty bickering of the Jewish nation. As he stared into the face of him who is the truth, Pilate waxed philosophical: **"What is truth?"** (Jn 18:38). In spite of the dire warnings of his wife, the seasoned politician did what comes so naturally to the carnal mind: he sold his soul for a moment of political expediency: "Something, *anything*, to keep the mob from revolting."

**"Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?"** Caiaphas showed the philosophy of his age. Scholars store up knowledge

they have learned from others. Philosophers draw on their own intellect. Both depend on fallen human intelligence. Caiaphas, the high priest, showed himself to be a scholar and a philosopher. The best Caiaphas could hope for was the survival of Israel as a nation. He was sure that he was doing God a favor by condemning Jesus to death: **“It is better that one man die than that the nation perish”** (Jn 11:50).

**“Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?”**

**“Jews demand miraculous signs.”** Then there was Herod, who had been waiting to see Jesus hoping to see a miraculous sign. But Jesus did not so much as speak a word. Who of us, when we were young in the faith, were not taken in by the clamor of the soldiers and thieves for a similar miracle? **“Come down from the cross if you are the Christ of God! Come down and we will believe you!”** (Mk 15:32).

But to the shame of our foolish thinking, Jesus did not come down. No matter what Jesus did, the Jews weren't convinced: the miraculous feedings, exorcisms, the healing of lifelong illnesses, or the raising of Lazarus from the dead. Besides, your salvation depended on his refusal to satisfy their desire for a miracle. Aren't you glad that Jesus did not give in to your childish desire for him to come down from the cross? **“Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?”**

## 2

Can the almighty God create a stone so large that he cannot lift it? That question is child's play in comparison to the question, “Can God punish all sin and at the same time forgive all sin?” These two contradictory facts can only be reconciled on Jesus' cross. **“We preach Christ crucified”**—because God laid all of the punishment for our sins upon his holy, innocent Son on that cross. On the cross God treated his sinless Son as we sinners should have been treated. **“We preach Christ crucified”**—because the perfect mercy and love of God came to us poor sinners from Jesus' cross. Because of Jesus' cross, God treated rebels, like you and me, as he should only have treated his holy Son!

The foolish wisdom of the cross gives us the confidence to say, **“If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?”** (Ro 8:31,32).

Armed with the wisdom that we are God's own dear children because of Jesus' cross, we can face any of the adversities of life—or death.

No doubt the greatest burden we must wrestle with in our lives is 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?”** (Ro 8:33-35).

When division and false doctrine threaten God's people, the wisdom and power of the cross lift us from pride and self-promotion to the humility of childlike faith. The cross makes us humble learners who sit at the feet of their Savior.

When death approaches, the wisdom and power of the cross lifts our eyes to the Lord's mercy and compassion that guarantee us safe passage to the new heaven and the new earth, the home of God's elect. Together with the apostle Paul, we can stake our eternal happiness on the wisdom of Jesus' cross:

In the coming weeks we will focus intently on these seeming contradictions, the one that makes the unbeliever shake his head confirming his unbelief for all the world. It is also the one that gives you and me hope for ourselves, for our church, and for our world. It is why you and I take comfort not in the size of our churches, the depth of our faith, or “success” in any worldly way. We preach Christ crucified and the foolish wisdom of the cross. Amen.