

The power of foolishness

1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5

Two weeks ago I asked whether you've recently been offended.
This week a different question,
have you recently had reason to feel embarrassed?

Let me share with you a recent episode were I felt like a fool,
I share it with you so that instead of feeling embarrassed yourself you can
feel awkward for me!

It's perhaps easiest to feel foolish when you're learning a new skill,
As a learner you are prone to make mistakes,
It's one of the reasons why we don't extend ourselves, isn't it?

One area where I'm trying to grow
is in my involvement in wider church affairs.
It's one thing to be involved in parish life,
it's another to be involved on the level of the wider church.

Each year representatives
from all our Anglican churches here in Sydney
get together for our annual synod, a meeting of 700 people
where speeches are given and decisions made.
It's chaired by the Archbishop and full of lawyers
and other impressive people.

And last year when the agenda was released
I saw there were a number of proposals that I disagreed with.
I thought "Well, this is my time to get involved!".
So as discussion started I stood up and made my contribution, only to realize
half way though
that I had not understood the previous speakers point.
This became apparent when a chorus of voices behind called out "No, that's
not right!". And so my speech was very short lived!.
At the end of the discussion the Archbishop said
"Well we're off to good start, aren't we?"
Let's just say that I didn't cover myself in glory!
But I'll be back! It's a learning experience.

Today as we continue in our series in 1 Corinthians,
the Apostle Paul has some bad news for us.
Usually he's in the business of good news,
but today the bad news is that as Christians,
we need go get used to appearing foolish.

As Paul explains, for many in our society our faith appears foolish.
 The Christian message is foolish,
 Christian believers are foolish,
 Christian preachers are foolish.

Like you and me, the Corinthians didn't want to appear crazy,
 they wanted to appear smart and clever and successful,
 But Paul wants them to become comfortable with foolishness
 because as he will show,
 there is actually great power in Christian foolishness.
 God's plan is to use what is foolish to great effect.

Let's see how that is, 1 Corinthians 1:18.

¹⁸For 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.

So here is the first type of foolishness
 that Paul would like the Corinthians to embrace:
 the foolish message of the cross.

The message that on that very first good Friday, Jesus of Nazareth,
 both God and human being in the one person,
 died to provide atonement for our sin.

Now, many of us here today have heard and believed this message for some time,
 so our familiarity with the message means we are immune to its foolishness.
 But to those not familiar with the Christian faith
 this message *does* sound strange.
 Remember the response of Festus, the Roman Governor, when he heard it:
 Paul, you are out of your mind! Your great learning has made you insane!

Why does the message of the cross appear foolish?

It's message that bypasses normal human wisdom, let's read from v19

For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate."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?

When you consider the usual worldview formed by most religions,
 you have God who is almighty and powerful and distant,
 and then you have us sinful humans who need to make a better effort.
 That's the basic pattern that human wisdom has come up with.

But the message of the cross challenges that spiritual worldview.

It's a message about the God who's come to us

so he could provide atonement on our behalf.

It's a message that doesn't fit the way we humans like to think.

And because it doesn't fit people have trouble accepting it. Skip down to v22

Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles

The Jews and the Greeks had their own ideas of what constituted sensible religion.
 Jews said they wanted great miraculous signs—
 evidence of divine power at work—
 but we learn from the gospels that even when they did receive these signs
 they didn't have much effect.

The Greeks were looking for wisdom;
 the right ideas that would unlock the secrets of the universe
 and how we were to act within it.

To have Jesus crucified made no sense to either of these worldviews.
 "How was a crucified messiah a sign of God's power?
 What kind of idea is it to have your savior crucified?
 We can't submit ourselves to this concept! What foolishness!"

And it's still a stumbling block to people today
 I mentioned how this message doesn't fit with other religions,
 nor does it fit with how secular humanists think.
 This is the worldview that says that we don't need any kind of God,
 we can just rely on our own human capabilities.
 But the message of Jesus dying for sins sounds foolish to them as well,
 because it implies that we human beings are sinful. How ridiculous!

Here is a billboard that was erected in 2015
 by a group opposed to teaching scripture in schools.



They think the message of the cross is so foolish,
 that all they need to do is repeat the message
 and we'll all be suitably shocked.
 And I'm sure that for many people this strategy would work,
 because it's so far-fetched to suggest that we need a savior!

Now when this sign was erected, lots of Christians had a good laugh,
because in a wonderfully ironic way, the atheists were doing our job for us.
Yes, the message is foolish to some, but we believe it's powerful.
So to have the message up on a billboard without paying cent is a gospel win.

Two times in these opening verses Paul says the message is powerful,
Two times he says it's a message that can save.
This is the method God has used to protect us from sin's effects,
and to save us from judgment.
The method is to send us a message about what Christ has done.

Perhaps this another reason why the Christian faith might seem foolish:
we attribute a lot of power to something very simple.
Christianity is not complex; it's essence can be reduced to a few words.
But those words are enough to lead us to eternal life.
Think about a the power of a seed that grows and cracks open a pavement,
Or about the power of an afternoon's rain to turn a brown field green.
Small things have big effects, and so it is with the message about the cross.
Foolish to those who are perishing, but to those being saved it is the power of God.

And it isn't only the message that's foolish,
I'm sorry to say it, but it's also the believers who are foolish.
Verse 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.
It's interesting that Paul uses the words "not many".
Some of them were wise and influential and of noble birth.
But the vast majority were ordinary people, nothing to special about them.

In my last church we had a member of the congregation named John.
John was in his 60s
and lived in a hostel for men with severe psychological problems.
I used to give him a ride home from each night and *he would stink*.
After dropping him off I'd wind down every window on my trip back.
Sometimes I would ask him "what do you think of Jesus John?"
"Oh he would have been very tall Mr Kemp, over 6 foot Mr Kemp"
"And what else can you tell me John?"
"He defeated the power of sin and the devil Mr Kemp".
He was a believer even though he had the brain of a child
and couldn't always control his bladder.
Not very impressive, but part of God's church.

Not every organization has such an open policy.
How many of you have memories of trying to get into a club,
only to have the bouncer look you up and down and say
"members only tonight"? The church is different.

Now why is that the case? Verse 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.

That's the reason, so that no one may boast before him.

So that no one can say "I found the way to eternal life myself!",
or "I got myself together, I managed my life really well,
and so God has no choice but to accept me"

The humble nature of church membership is a symbol

that everything we receive is only by the grace and generosity of God.

When we take a good look at each other, with all our faults and imperfections,
we're reminded that the things we might ordinarily value in ourselves and
others aren't that important.

So even though it's not something we might aspire to ordinarily,
having fellowship with lesser types is something God would have us embrace.

But it's also appropriate to recognize that you're a lesser type yourself; we all are.

Verse 30: It is because of him [not you, but *God*] 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."

The things that make us right and acceptable before God,
righteousness, holiness and redemption, we don't generate these things ourselves,
they're gifted to us from God,

And there are many gifts that Christians can enjoy.

For some Christians—not all, but for some—it's the schools we are part of,
for some it's the high standards of residential care we have access to,
all of it comes via God's grace, so we can't be proud.

And if you really want to have your pride shaken, then do some gospel preaching.

If the message and the ones believing it are foolish,
then so are the ones bringing the message.

From ch 2 v1 Paul writes 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.

In the ancient world public speaking was like a spectator sport.

People loved to gather and listen to the philosophers speak.

If speaking was your game, then two things would please the crowd:
the quality of your ideas, and the manner in which you presented them—
wisdom and eloquence.

How did Paul go in this arena?

In terms of the quality of his ideas, Paul only had one idea that he majored on,
verse 2 For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him

You know one of my favourite stories from modern Australian
is the story of Barry Marshall and Robin Warren,
two scientists who discovered the link between bacteria and peptic ulcers.

The common wisdom before their discovery
was that ulcers were caused by stress, or perhaps spicy food.
But Marshall and Warren had a theory that ulcers were caused by bacteria.
No one would publish their work. It was foolish, not worth passing on.
So Barry Marshall decided to put his theory to the test
by making a broth full of the bacteria, and then swallowing it!
Two weeks later he was riddled with ulcers,
but a course of antibiotics cleared it up.

Now imagine if you were one of his scientific peers
“Barry, what a dumb thing to do! Everyone knows your theory is rubbish,
and now you’re willing to take such drastic action on it? Don’t be such a fool!”
But his foolishness won him a Nobel Prize. It’s not foolishness if it’s right.

Is the cross foolishness? To many people it looks like it,
but Paul says it’s the power of God. So the foolishness is worth it.