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The Foolishness of the Cross

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This week's bible reading is from 1 Corinthians chapter 1 verses 18 - 30.

Introduction

An American newspaper once published an article, in which it said...

"We are pleased to report that the hurricane that blew away the Church last week, did no real damage to the town".

Amusing yes, but it also gives us some indication of just how our modern society views the church these days – unimportant; not really essential and something people can happily do without. Sadly, we find ourselves living in an age in which the church is very much marginalised; its teachings and the Word of God are not just ignored, they're often openly derided and mocked. No one these days is interested in seeking the Kingdom of God, as Jesus urges us to (cf Matt:6:33).

The Kingdom Laws

For those who do seek out Christ and His Kingdom, not only will they will find forgiveness and salvation, but they will also discover a whole new way of looking at the world; a new way of understanding; a new set of values and standards. For in God's Kingdom there are certain principles that we are to abide by - principles that exemplify the wisdom of God.

For example, Jesus teaches us that we are to love our enemies; forgive those who persecute us and pray for those who hate us. He also said: If you want to be rich, then give your money away, and if someone steals your coat, then give them your shirt also.

God's Wisdom

Now you don't need to be a genius to realise that these kingdom principles are the very opposite of the standards of the world, which teaches us to hate our enemies, and hang on tight to our money. Indeed God, in His wisdom, often turns human values upside down by the way in which He works. The prime example of this of course, is the life of Christ, or more specifically His death. Jesus, the very Son of God, won His greatest victory by dying a criminal's death nailed to a Cross; but to the world

this just sounds like nonsense, foolishness – not wisdom. To the casual observer then, Jesus' death looked like a tragic failure, a terrible mistake, a rather abrupt end to a promising career.

Tragic Failure

Jesus had no empire, no army. His followers had no weapons and little education. He left behind no formal organisation; yet by allowing Himself to be executed in this way, He defeated the very hoards of Satan and conquered death itself. And amazingly, that victory over death also extends to His followers, too. Yes, we will die an earthly death but, crucially, we won't stay dead. We shall raise again - just as Jesus Himself did.

But this kind of talk - rising from the dead to be with Christ in the Kingdom of Heaven - sounds to many, like utter nonsense; wishful thinking at its worst. Sadly, few people today are able to see Jesus' death for what it really is, or understand just what He achieved by dying on the Cross. It is all dismissed as foolishness by the sceptical, unbelieving mind. As St. Paul says:

"The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved, it is the power of God...For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength."

In reality then, through the 'foolishness of the Cross', God has turned the world on its head, and...

- Out of death comes life,
- Out of weakness comes strength
- Out of humility comes greatness.

Foolishness

These things - the eternal truths of the Gospel - are foolishness to the world. We the followers of Christ, have a message that is seen as having no credibility, no relevance in the modern world. The Christian faith involves not just believing in Jesus Christ, it also involves believing in the Gospel message that Christ proclaimed, and that means accepting the reality of Heaven and Hell, Angels and demons, and of course - life after death.

Yet, this message is one that many ordinary people, simply cannot accept these days, because we live in the modern world where such things as these are no-longer regarded as likely, probable or true – despite the evidence to the contrary.

The belief among the majority today, is that science has somehow disproved religion; that mankind has now 'grown up', come of age and done away with the primitive thinking and beliefs of the past.

The faith of those that still believe in God is seen as largely harmless, providing it doesn't get extreme or fanatical; its seen as "alright for those who want it" - but for most people today it no-longer serves any real purpose in the modern world.

Modern Age

I've used the word 'modern' deliberately, because today it seems, this word alone is regarded by many as sufficient argument against God and religion. How often have you heard people quote the date in a discussion about morality or faith. "Come on" they say, "this is the 21st cent." And this is usually said in such a way as if somehow the date alone can determine what is true or morally acceptable.

But what does the date have to do with truth? Does truth have a limited self-life; does it suddenly expire after a pre-determined length of time? Is there a use by date on the Bible? The world in its wisdom, believes there is.

The Castle

The change in attitude towards religious faith that we witness in the modern western world, has virtually paralysed the European church. The wisdom of the world, it would seem, has finally overcome the foolishness of the Cross, and we, as Christians are not at all sure what to do about it.

The all pervasive nature of modern secular culture has isolated Christianity within a sort of metaphorical castle. The gospel which used to so strongly influence education, the legal system and politics, finds itself adopting a siege mentality. Hunkering down, is the order of the day.

Happy

However, for the most part it would seem the church is rather happy in its castle, insulated from the world outside. We have developed our own special language; our own dress code; and we have our own special church music. Yet all the time the outside world is becoming more and more distant. So what do we need to do, to draw people into our castle, or at least get them to see at as a place of interest, that they might like to explore? Well we need two things: an invitation and a drawbridge.

Invitation

We need to let people know that the Church is alive and well; that it hasn't died a death. We need to be active in our various social networks, connecting with family and friends; people we know; people we work with.

There's also a real need to be out amongst the people, communicating our faith in the context of everyday life; 'gossiping the gospel', inviting people to "taste and see that the Lord is good" (Ps 34:1).

I think it's going to be important as we move forward, that Christians learn to feel comfortable and confident inviting people to come and experience Christ and His Church. Indeed, this has to become the norm for us if we are to help people understand the "foolishness of the Cross".

Drawbridge

Ok, so that's the first thing, inviting people to come, see and experience the church. Secondly we need a drawbridge to let down, so that people can comfortably cross over from their world outside, into our world inside. But what kinds of things will actually encourage people to cross the drawbridge once the invitation has been given? Well there are of course, the basics of being a friendly, welcoming church, loving and accepting of those who wish to join us. And I would hope that goes without saying - but what else is needed?

Surprised by Joy

Well the biggest problem we face, is the pre-conceived ideas that people have of church life – they believe it will be dull, boring and largely irrelevant, and in their minds, they've already written it off. So we need a drawbridge that will intrigue people. What we have to do is show them that their preconceptions were wrong: We want them to be "surprised by joy", as someone once put it.

It's been my experience that many people expect church worship and church goes to be dull, drab and unexciting. But if they see that this clearly isn't the case, they're likely to be intrigued. A lively, dynamic and exciting church can have quite an impact on a local community. A church that is alive, that isn't locked into some kind of time warp and has embraced aspects of modern music and the digital revolution; a church that's clearly living in the 21st century, yet without compromising its integrity and beliefs -a church such as this would, I believe, prove to be very attractive.

A Fresh Expression

Now some of you will have realised that what I'm talking about here, could be called a "fresh expression of church" – and yes, that is where I'm going with this address. The traditional, historical form of church, with its choral based worship and liturgy, really struggles to connect with people today, especially younger people. If we want people to join us, we have to offer them a form of church that they want to be a part of. The kind of church that the under 40s of the 21st century might be interested in joining, may need to embrace a rather different kind of worship, but unfortunately there isn't time to explore that any further now.

Suffice to say that it's my belief that as people get to know us and experience God in our midst, they will begin to understand that God's Word is not foolish, that Jesus' death on the Cross was not a failure, but an amazing act of love and the key to our forgiveness and salvation. Amen.