

Foolish Wisdom

Montecito Covenant Church Vespers: Sunday March 23, 2003
(Exodus 20:1-17; 1 Cor. 1:18-25; Psalm 19; John 2:13-22)

I begin tonight with a story about a war to save the world from terror and destruction. A war that required the best of strategies, the wisest of counsel, and the bravest of combatants. But it's not a true story—it's the story Frodo the Hobbit and his companions whom duty compelled to leave the Shire to set out on a dangerous quest. As most of you know, they had to keep a powerful Ring from falling into the evil hands of Sauron, Lord of Mordor. As darkness falls over Middle Earth, Frodo meets with an assembly of wizards, dwarves and elves to determine how they might elude the enemy. Two things become clear to all at the Council of Elrond: one, that the small and ill-equipped Frodo was the one to carry the Ring; and two, that he must carry it directly into, not away from, Mordor.

Gandalf the wizard spoke for the council when he said:

It is wisdom to recognize necessity, . . . though as folly it may appear to those who cling to false hope. Well, let folly be our cloak, a veil before the eyes of the Enemy!

And here's how Master Elrond put it:

such is often the course of deeds that move the wheels of the world: small hands do them because they must, while the eyes of the great are elsewhere.

These words of Elrond and Gandalf might remind you a bit of the Apostle Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians (1:19). In language borrowed from a prophecy in Isaiah (29:14) we read:

19 "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." **20** Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

Paul knew a wisdom higher than the wisdom of the world—a wisdom that appeared pitifully weak impossibly foolish to almost everyone else. Of course Paul's cloak of folly was not about a hobbit who would risk his life, but a Messiah. And the perilous journey was not to Mount Doom, but to the cross.

Paul should not have been surprised. For God has a rather long history of making the world's wisdom look foolish—a lengthy track record of defying worldly 'common sense' (see 1 Cor 3:18-20). Here's a little test for you. See if you can identify the main character of these *foolishly wise* Bible headlines.

- *90-year old delivers first child to 100-year old dad!*
- *Boy left to rot by brothers—builds villa on Nile!*
- *Murderous nomad changes careers after talking to bush!*
- *Escaping slaves meet God in desert storm!*
- *Pubescent sheep-herder hand-picked for throne!*

Paul's Bible (our Old Testament) was packed with stories about God defying worldly wisdom, and doing something that looks rather foolish or weak or

backwards or scandalous. And nowhere is God's "foolishness" more on display than in the story Paul calls his "gospel": "The message of the cross"—that's verse 20—is that God has used the grisly death of Jesus to inaugurate a new age of salvation. To preach "Christ crucified"—that's verse 23 (cf. 2:2)—is to declare that Israel's Messiah suffered a shameful execution, AND that Christ's humiliating defeat was God's glorious triumph.

The intellectuals at the University of Corinth, or, for that matter, the University of California, are not impressed. They demand a message less contradictory, something more coherent, more plausible, more respectable. They want wisdom; they get madness (1:22-23). Even Paul's Jewish kin were scandalized. They want to see God's power; all they can see is weakness. Paul's gospel of the cross was a slap in their collective face (1:23). For them, Messiah belongs on a Jewish throne, not a Roman cross. They would bow before a jeweled crown but not a thorny one. What sort of king reigns from a tree? (Newbiggin, *Foolishness*, 99)

I think it's a good idea, every year during Lent, to brush up a bit on ancient Roman crucifixion. I could suggest several good readings, if you like, including a 90-page little book by Martin Hengel simply entitled *Crucifixion*. I recommend reading it every year before Easter. Here are seven things you might not know about ancient crucifixion.

1. Rome had no single, correct way to crucify its criminals: the only limit was the imagination of the executioner. Victims were often flogged, mutilated, tortured and even burned, before they were nailed up or impaled, naked, in different postures.
2. Crucifixion was considered the obvious choice for criminals, rebels and insubordinate slaves. It was called "the most wretched of deaths" (Josephus), "the supreme penalty" and the "slave's punishment." Roman slaves had to reckon with crucifixion as a very real, terrifying possibility.
3. Death by crucifixion was slow and excruciating, hastened only when victims had grown weak through loss of blood.
4. The Romans believed in punishment as deterrent, so they made sure crucifixions were done publicly for all to see—perhaps at a cross-roads, a hilltop, a theater, or the scene of the crime. Passing crowds would somehow feel more secure, believing that one more dangerous hoodlum had been taken off the streets.
5. The Latin word for cross, "crux," was considered vulgar, almost a swear-word.
6. The very first persecution of Christians in Rome, under emperor Nero, involved first crucifying and then igniting the suspended bodies, to provide light for his gardens by night.
7. Often victims' bodies were never buried; the suspended or discarded corpse would become, as one ancient writer put it, "evil food for birds of prey and grim pickings for dogs" [Hengel, 9]

So when Paul speaks of the folly of the cross, he is not speaking in metaphors. This is not some riddle that requires deep concentration to puzzle out. If the folly of the cross is unintelligible to us, maybe it's because we've forgotten about the brutal shameful of Roman crucifixion. For many folks in Paul's day, the cross really was a cause for shame: a symbol of weakness and terror—the number one reason why the Gospel should not be taken seriously.

But as time passed, the church elevated the cross to a symbol. I guess it was bound to happen, but when it did the symbol lost much of the cross's raw power to offend, to embarrass, to scandalize. The cross has been domesticated and laminated, polished and miniaturized. It has become something to dangle around my neck or to tattoo onto my arm. For some it is simply a nostalgic token of old-fashioned religion or a meaningless signal of piety.

Should the cross confront *our* intellectual pride? Cause *our* ears to burn? Shut *our* mouths? For us, of course, the cross is divine wisdom above all. Somehow we've come to realize the sheer brilliance of a plan that show God's saving *power* through *weakness*. But I want to leave you with a question—not a rhetorical one but a real one: Can the cross be to us God's wisdom if we've never struggled with its foolishness? Can the cross be to us God's strength if we've never blushed at its weakness? Perhaps this year during Lent, we'll recover in the cross God's wise foolishness and God's impossibly strong weakness.