



Kirknewton and East Calder Parish Church of Scotland

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Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Sermon: Rev Dr André J Groenewald

Background to the reading

In the apostle Paul's day it was actually very important according to your status to be wise and the Greek philosophers of his day made a living contemplating the nature of wisdom and how to find it.

According to the philosophers of his day wisdom or happiness could be found differently. There were different schools of philosophical thought namely Epicureanism, Stoicism, Scepticism and Gnosticism. According to Epicureanism the highest pleasure (tranquillity and freedom from fear) was obtained by knowledge, friendship, and living a virtuous and temperate life. To stoicism true wisdom consisted of a will that is in agreement with nature. The "sceptics" refrained from making any truth claims. It seems as if all these philosophies emphasized the autonomous power of humans and their ability to know and discern in a natural way everything about God, the world and beyond.

All these ideas were evident in the background when Paul was writing his letter to the Corinthians. But more so was the philosophy of Gnosticism a constant threat to his ministry. There was one group of Gnostic opponents who followed in his footsteps and made his ministry difficult and complicated. In our reading more specifically it seems as if Paul is opposing their views especially on the issue of his leadership. The Gnostics believed in a special "revelation" out with that of God speaking through the Bible which made their ministry open to false teaching. They relied on a secret teaching that was only knowable to a few. The name Gnosis is derived from the Greek word "gnosis" which means knowledge. They believed that it was this secret knowledge which told them who they were, what they had become, what situation they had been cast into, in what direction they were hastening, and what they had been redeemed from. The Gnostic Christians thought of themselves as not from this world. To them they were destined to the higher, spirit world. They formed an elite group in the early church, being sure of their redemption and future.

Now Paul tell all these people who though so much of themselves, who trusted their own wisdom so much, what wisdom really is. He also says the wisdom that he is talking about would not make sense at all to them. They would regard it as foolish!

True wisdom is to serve the Lord and know your place as a redeemed sinner. No one can boast about his own abilities. The authoritative message is called *the gospel*

and has as its content *the cross of Christ*. Christ sent Paul to preach the gospel and not to secure a personal following. In a possible play on words, Paul calls the gospel *the message*, lit. ‘the *logos/word* of the cross. He argues that the response to its preaching is twofold. It is regarded as absurd by some but for others it was the powerful means by which they became the people of God. He then starts his argument by quoting from the Old Testament Isaiah 29:14 which promises that God will overthrow and bring to nothing the admired wisdom and intelligence of the wise. He ends his argument also from a quotation from Jeremiah 9:24 which renounces the boasting of the educated, wealthy and powerful elite and demands that those who boast must boast only in the Lord.

Paul states that the admired rhetoric and theological reflection of his day failed because it could not bring people to know God.

Neither the wise man, *i.e.* the philosopher, nor the [Jewish] scholar or ‘scribe’, all of whom in their day epitomized education, taught the wisdom of God. In contrast their wisdom was foolishness. The intellectual world did not know God. God’s purpose was achieved through what was regarded as foolish. In the Roman society crucifixion was regarded as the appropriate death of slaves. Even the Jews regarded crucifixions as shameful. A crucified Messiah was the epitome of weakness. It was indeed regarded as “foolish” to associate power with a crucified man! God’s wisdom and his power are located in Christ. While this may be designated as a foolish and weak way by men, God is wiser and stronger than they are.

Paul says to the Corinthian Christians that although many of them are from the lower ranks of society and not from noble birth, God is using them. God chose the foolish in contrast to the wise, the weak in preference to the powerful, and those whom their society regarded as ‘nobodies’ as opposed to those who were courted as important. God’s purpose in doing this is to prevent any boasting in public status. All that is needed is to be found in Christ Jesus, as Paul has stressed earlier in verses 4-7. For Paul and for all Christians, wisdom, righteousness, holiness and redemption are located in Christ and not on human wisdom.

To say it as short as possible: true wisdom is not found as a natural ability inside human beings. True wisdom is found in a relationship with God through faith alone.
Amen

Sermon

Usually when I ask people to write down their memories of a loved one that has died, quite a significant number of people say: “our loved one didn’t suffer fools”! In the Victorian times there were even ships of fools where “foolish” or “mad” people were shipped off to the open sea left at their own mercy.

It seems so natural for us to tag people by means of branding them or by associating them with nicknames emphasising their weaknesses. We like to judge others and pat ourselves on the back saying: “Luckily we are not so foolish as so and so.”

We like to think that we have all the answers to everything and that those who dare

to disagree with us are the fools! But now Paul says we must forget about ourselves and our ideas and stop boasting about ourselves. Instead we must celebrate the fact that God saved us in His great wisdom by sending His only Son Jesus Christ to die on a cross. We must thank God that He is so wise, knowing us as we do not know ourselves. God knew that we would not manage to live in a relationship with him and to inherit the eternal kingdom without his help. He knew that without Christ we would not have the ability or the commitment to please Him. We must find strength in God's power and wisdom and stop relying on ourselves.

I think we usually find this "wisdom" when something terrible happens to us of which we have no control such as an incurable illness, or natural disasters. It is only then that realise we actually have no power at all.

No human can overpower death. God did it although it seemed "foolish" in the eyes of the world and not typical of someone that has so much power. He rose from the grave in order for many to live in all eternity with him.

This passage must give us hope and direction. Sometimes we might think but what can I do to enhance the Kingdom of God on this earth. We often think of ourselves as not worthy to mean anything. We often compare ourselves to others thinking but I can't sing like so and so. I can't pray like so and so. I can't read from the bible like so and so...

Maybe the time has come for us all to stop think of what we cannot do and focus on the things we can do. Let me give you an example: This week someone broke the lock of the door to the entrance of the hall. And we all would think at first thought that a "locksmith" or a handyman's job is not enhancing the kingdom of God on earth. But you know what if a locksmith did not provided a new key and if the handyman did not fixed the lock, none of us could go into the hall to worship God!

God works in many ways. He uses us all in different ways. We must forget about our own abilities and focus on what God can do with our talents and gifts.

May we go from here and never ever think of ourselves as more important or wise than others! May we rather use our energy to praise God for His wisdom and power!
Amen