

## WE PREACH CHRIST CRUCIFIED

Text: 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

Readings: John 19:1-18; 1 Cor 1:10-25

Theme: The cross of Christ is foolishness to unbelievers but is God's means of saving those who believe.

Purpose: To show how God saves people through faith in the saving death of Jesus on the cross.

The cross is a universal symbol of Christianity. If you see a building with a cross on the outside you can rightly assume that it is a church.

Some people are superstitious about the symbol of the cross and think that it has some magical power or that wearing it will do them some good or ward off evil spirits, but that is not so.

Rather the cross is a reminder of the sacrificial death of Jesus in which he died to pay for the sins of all who believe in him.

This is what we remember this Good Friday and this is what the apostle Paul wrote about in this passage. He explains that the cross of Christ is foolishness to unbelievers but is God's means of saving those who believe.

**Context:** He wrote about this because the church in Corinth was deeply divided; some members followed one leader and others another leader. Paul pointed out that this was all wrong!

Instead of following human leaders they needed to follow Christ! True Christian leaders do not want a personal following, rather they want to point people to Jesus. Our message is about Christ crucified. This was Paul's message, his gospel, the substance of his preaching; "we preach Christ crucified" he wrote (v 23).

But he knew that people responded to this message in one of two ways – some did not believe in Jesus and others did. We will examine these two responses.

**1. First, THE RESPONSE OF UNBELIEF.** Paul identified two groups of unbelievers - the Jews and the Greeks.

**a. The Jews,** wrote Paul, "demand miraculous signs" (v 22).

i. Through their history God had shown the Jews much mercy and had rescued them out of times of trouble. When they were oppressed he had delivered them from their enemies; when they were hungry he gave them manna and meat; when they were thirsty he gave them water; when there was a drought he sent them rain. He did this especially during the days of the Judges and Moses and Elijah.

Over time the Jews focused on these miracles rather than on God himself. They preferred God's *signs* rather than his salvation. This was their attitude also in the 1st century AD.

For instance, in AD 45 a man named Theudas persuaded thousands of people to leave their homes and follow him to the Jordan river promising that, at his command, the river would divide and he would lead them across on dry ground!

In AD 54 a man from Egypt arrived in Jerusalem claiming to be a prophet. He persuaded 30,000 people to follow him out to the Mount of Olives promising that, at his command, the walls of Jerusalem would fall down!

These were the miraculous signs the Jews were expecting. They expected this from Jesus as well. The religious leaders said to him, "Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you" (Matt 12:39). They wanted a Messiah who would throw out the Romans, give them back their land and make them a great people. They wanted a powerful king who would give them a happy and prosperous life.

Sometimes we are like this. We are more interested in God's signs than his salvation.. We want a God who will solve our problems, cure our sickness, take away our pain, heal our child, provide a job, get us out of debt, give us a happy marriage. Of course, we may pray for these things and God may give them us.

But God is more interested in our holiness than in our health. He is more concerned about our spiritual health than our physical well-being. Rather than remove our trial he wants us to trust him in the midst of our trials.

ii. The Jews could not accept this. When Jesus refused to give them a miraculous sign they rejected him. And when he died on a cross that was the last straw! The message about Christ crucified became a stumbling block to the Jews then and still is today (v 23) (cf. 2 Cor 3:15).

He was not the sort of Messiah they expected. In fact Moses had written that "anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse" (Deut 21:23). How could a crucified man, who was cursed by God, be the Messiah?! Impossible! Utter nonsense! It was an offence to them, a stumbling block; the Greek word is *skandalon* – it was a scandal!

The Jews rejected Jesus and refused to believe in him.

**b. The Greeks** also refused to believe in Jesus, but for a different reason; they looked for wisdom (v 22).

i. Corinth was one of the greatest cities in Greece. It was wealthy and luxurious; the residents also had the reputation for speaking excellent Greek – they spoke it accurately and beautifully, in the same way as we regard BBC English as the best spoken English.

The city was also a centre of intellectual thought and philosophy. The Greeks, especially those in Corinth, prided themselves on their knowledge and learning. They thought they could gain a full knowledge of life and of God through their own reason, by using their minds.

This is still a widely held view today in our western societies – that we can understand the world by reason and by the scientific method and that through these means we can solve the problems of the world.

Corinth was full of wise men and philosophers. But they did not come to know God through their wisdom because they refused to believe what God had revealed about himself.

Paul was not against people using their mind and their reason. He was not against careful thinking and detailed arguments. Paul himself was very well educated, and there have been many brilliant Christian men and women in the history of the church.

But we will not know God just through using our reason. Faith in Jesus Christ is not about being intelligent.

Jesus prayed, "I praise you, Father,...because you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure" (Luke 10:21).

Paul reminded the Christians in Corinth that not many of them were wise by human standards, not many were influential or of noble birth (v 26).

What Jesus did on the cross was for all people, for everyone who believes – intelligent and simple, rich and poor, white and blue collar workers, Maori and Pakeha.

ii. The wise men of Corinth could not accept this. To them the message of the cross was foolishness (v 23). In the Roman Empire only the lowest of criminals were executed. No Roman citizen was ever executed in this terrible manner. No one of any standing or reputation would be put to death like this,

so why would a man who claimed to be God allow himself to be crucified. This did not make sense to them. It was foolishness!

This attitude to the message of the cross has continued through history even among those who claim to be Christians.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries there was a strong movement in the church called liberalism. Liberal “Christians” claimed that the traditional understanding of Christianity did not make sense to modern, reasonable people; that the idea of Christ dying as a sacrifice for sin was a primitive religious perspective; that to believe that someone could rise from the dead was unscientific; and they also maintained that miracles could not happen.

In New Zealand one of the leading theologians who held these views was Dr Lloyd Geering. Many other preachers and leaders in the mainline churches were liberals and this false doctrine sucked the life and faith out of these churches for a long time.

Liberalism is simply another expression of unbelief, similar to that of the Greeks, exalting man’s wisdom over God’s wisdom, trusting in the reason of man rather than the revelation of the Bible.

We have seen that some people refuse to believe the message of Christ crucified. Many of the Jews did not believe and many of the Gentiles also rejected this message. Many today maintain a position of unbelief.

**2. But there are others who do believe. So, secondly, we consider **THE RESPONSE OF BELIEF****

Paul rejected the demand of the Jews for miraculous signs and the Greeks search for wisdom. He resolved to “preach the gospel”, the good news of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ (v17). He determined to “preach Christ crucified” (v 23).

The word translated “preach” can also be translated as proclaim or herald. It was used of a herald going out to proclaim the message of the King with the authority of the one who sent him. Preachers of the gospel today are also heralds and ambassadors of the King with a message to proclaim.

For those of us who are being saved, “whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks”, this message of Christ crucified is “the power of God and the wisdom of God” (v 18&23).

### **a. It is the power of God**

The cross seemed a weakness – Jesus allowed himself to be arrested, tried, flogged and then crucified. Yet through all this Jesus had great power; he could have called on 12 legions of angels to rescue him but he chose not to (Matt 26:53). He reminded Pontius Pilate that Pilate had no power over him except what had been given to him (John 19:11). Jesus was in control of everything that was going on.

It turned out that “the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength” (v 25). It seemed as though Jesus was weak but actually he was all powerful – over Satan, sin and death.

i. By his death on the cross Jesus defeated *Satan*; “...having disarmed the powers and authorities he made a public display of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (Col 2:15).

ii. By his death he also took away “the sting of death which is *sin* and the power of sin which is the law” (1 Cor 15:56). The law of God condemns each one of us as lawbreakers, as sinners.. That means that we deserve the eternal punishment of God for our sin and our sins.

But by his perfect life Jesus fulfilled the law and by his perfect death he paid the price for the sin of all who believe in him, he took the punishment that we deserved and died in our place.

iii. By his death on the cross he also conquered *death*. Having defeated Satan, and having paid the full price for sin by going through the punishment of hell and by dying, he could then rise again from the dead, “the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor 15:20). His resurrection is the guarantee that one day all of us who have believed in him will also be raised from the dead.

The cross proves the power of our triune God!

**b. It also proves the wisdom of God.**

To the Greeks and to many people in our day and age the cross seems foolish, nonsensical. But “the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom” (v 25). (Paul does not mean the cross was foolish but rather than people *thought* it was foolish, that’s the way it seemed to them.)

The cross, however, demonstrated God’s wisdom because this is the means he used to save his people; “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” (v 18).

A man, Adam, had sinned, so a man had to pay for sin. So God sent his Son to earth as a man. The eternal Son of God took on our human nature, he became a man like us and he died in our place. This demonstrated God’s wisdom, grace and mercy.

Paul wrote in verse 30, “It is because of him [that is, God] that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.”

The cross is the central symbol of Christianity. Paul and all faithful preachers of the gospel have preached Christ and him crucified. This is the gospel, the good news about Christ.

Many, sadly, reject this good news and refuse to believe.  
Others accept it, believe it, respond in faith.

What about you?

Do you know this God who is all wise?

Do you believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and the Son of Man?

Do you believe that he died on the cross to pay for your sins?

Are you determined to love him, follow him and praise him?

Amen