

The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, January 29, 2023

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The Power and Wisdom of the Cross

1 Corinthians 1:18–31

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Eph 1:2

St. Paul writes, **“For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. . . . For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men”** (vv 18, 22–25)

What stands at the center of the Christian faith? How do we most clearly confess what we believe? What’s at the core of who you are and how you live? For St. Paul, the answer is clear: at the center of Christianity stands the cross. And not just any old cross, but *the* cross of Jesus Christ. There’s no debate about this. It’s not up to you or me to decide what Christianity is or isn’t. What we think and feel about it doesn’t matter . . . doesn’t matter at all. So take it or leave it, believe it or pooh-pooh it, **the word of the cross** is Christianity (v 18). **We preach Christ crucified** (v 23)—nothing more, but also and nothing less.

THROUGH THE CROSS OF CHRIST,
GOD REVEALS HIS POWER AND WISDOM TO US.

I.

Now the cross, the crucifix—it’s everywhere. Standing above the altar. Hung on the living room wall. Worn around the neck. Depicted in pencil drawings, acrylic paintings, and stained glass. Colored with crayons by Sunday School children. Folded out of palm leaves. Engraved on our hymnals. Traced over the forehead and the heart. Maybe even tattooed on the wrist.

It’s such a strange sign, though, isn’t it? The cross isn’t beautiful—not like the beauty of a sunset or a mountain summit. And it isn’t powerful—not like the power of a sword or an army. And it isn’t wise—not like the wisdom of a philosophy book or a university

class. So what is it? The cross is an old-fashioned instrument of execution for criminals and slaves. It points to blood and suffering and death. It speaks of defeat and loss.

Even after centuries of Christian teaching and practice, what associations does the cross have? We might see a cross as a fitting symbol of sacrifice or mercy. We might think of a cross as a sign of compassion or love. But if power and wisdom are what we're looking for, we're not likely to think of the cross. Senators don't praise the cross as a powerful instrument. Professors don't hold up the cross as the greatest wisdom. So, let me ask you: Where do you look for power? What is your source of wisdom? We're tempted to seek out the power and wisdom that the world offers. We're tempted to praise and follow those who are wise and powerful in earthly things. The cross may be good enough for Sunday, but what good is it on Monday and Tuesday?

The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, St. Paul says, but to us who are being saved it's the power of God (v 18). In other words, the cross sounds like foolishness to those who don't believe. No matter how well we dress it up, the world won't buy it. The cross isn't attractive or successful. It doesn't make for good optics. Yet we Christians hear in the cross the very power of God Himself—the power of God to save. The cross *is* our salvation. And by the cross, we mean Christ crucified!

With the cross, God turns everything on its head—even the world with its power and wisdom. The world sees power in Roman centurions with swords and spears. The world sees wisdom in Pilate washing his hands while allowing an innocent man to be crucified. It's easy to do the same. Even Jesus' mother and brothers thought He had forgotten Himself (Mk 3:21). Jewish opponents called Him insane (Acts 26:24). The Roman governor Festus said the same about St. Paul (Acts 26:24).

Even the apostles found the cross hard to stomach. When Jesus tells them that He must be crucified, how do they respond? They think it's foolishness. Peter rebukes Him. They argue about which of them is the greatest. And don't you think that Judas decided to betray Jesus precisely because he was disappointed and disenchanted by what was happening? It wasn't the way he expected or wanted things to go. It's folly—to those who are perishing.

But not to God. In the cross, God reveals His power and His wisdom. The crucifixion wasn't an accident or an unfortunate turn of events. It was His plan. *The way* He chose to work. If you're looking for God—if you want to know Him and what He's up to—if you want to see His power and wisdom—then look at the cross. Look into the defeat, sorrow, pain, humiliation, anguish, failure, sin, and death. That's where God Himself confronts us. That's where He meets us in person. That's where He makes His presence

near. The cross is the victory of God—of God crucified to death in order to defeat death. It's what we ourselves deserve for our sin. It's that real, that graphic, that frightening. It's also that glorious and good.

II.

"Where's the one who is wise?" St. Paul asks. **"Where's the scribe? Where's the debater of this age?"** (v 20). He targets those who raise arguments against the knowledge of God in Jesus Christ. Whoever from their own cleverness opposes the true knowledge of God. Jesus says the same thing when He prays. **"I thank You, Father,"** He Says, **"Lord of heaven and earth, that you've hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was Your gracious will"** (Matt 11:25–26). What the world rejects and despises, God values and elevates. He takes what is unimpressive—the word of the cross—and uses it to save.

The word of the cross and the preaching of Christ crucified **is folly**—to those who are perishing. After all, **Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom.** The Jews demanded signs of Jesus. They said that they'd believe if he'd do impressive things. They wanted a display of power. They desired glory, not the cross. But Jesus instead pointed to His death and resurrection. The Greeks, on the other hand, valued wisdom, philosophy, intellectual prowess. To them, it made no sense that a crucified criminal would be Savior of the world.

If you're like the Jew, looking for signs and wonders as a display of God's power, then see that power displayed in Christ crucified. If you're like a Greek, on a quest for wisdom, then see God's wisdom perfectly revealed in the word of the cross. For **to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men** (vv 24–25). By the cross, God outsmarted and overpowered all human wisdom and power.

III.

So where will we seek God? Are we content to find Him in the cross? To know Him through the suffering and death of Jesus Christ? Are we content to build our lives on His cross? For our confidence and hope isn't based on who we are, but on who Christ is and what He has done.

Consider your calling, brothers, not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things

that are not, to bring to nothing things that are (vv 26–28). He chose us, not out of in merit or worthiness in ourselves but out of His own fatherly divine goodness and mercy through Christ. And it's still that way today. The church doesn't attract the most powerful and the wisest. It isn't only for the wealthy and popular. It draws people from the entire range of human experiences. In Christ, the Church is made up of people like us—those who are foolish, weak, lowly, and despised. Those whom the world calls nobodies, by the cross Christ calls saints. The poor in spirit, the mourning, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers—these are the ones whom Jesus calls blessed, and His word is what blesses us. Christ Himself is our wisdom, our righteousness, our sanctification, and our redemption.

So this is what stands at the heart of the Christian faith: Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate. This is what reveals the heart of God toward us. This is the emblem of His kingdom. Let's raise it in our church, in our homes, in our lives, and hold up His cross as our victory. We need this—for now we can boast not in ourselves, not in our own lives and works, but in Christ and Him crucified. What He has done alone gives us hope and salvation.

His death is our life. His weakness is our strength. His suffering is our glory. His folly is our wisdom. His sorrow is our joy.

Though daily life is lived under the cross, we know what God has done through Christ's cross. **To us who are being saved, it is the power of God!**

So let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord (v 31).

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Phil 4:7
