

Good morning, my name is Zoë, and I am a first year ordinand at Trinity College. It is a real privilege to be asked to speak to you this morning, and I am sad that I have met so few of you in person. I usually attend the family service with my three lively boys, in case you are wondering why you haven't seen me before.

Our passage today is from 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians, written by Paul to the church he founded in Corinth, in Greece. Now, I have a love/hate relationship with Paul. He has so many rich and wonderful things to say, but he does like to tie us in knots with *how* he says it. His words can sometimes take a little unpicking, and today is no exception! It helps sometimes to know a little about the context. Corinth was, and is, a busy port. Caught between two seas, it would have been a busy and diverse place. It was an important Roman city which had many temples, the most important of which was to Aphrodite – the goddess of love, whose priestesses were known for their ritual promiscuousness. Paul lived there for 18 months, working as a tentmaker, and founding the church there. He knew the people he was writing to well and was writing to settle an argument over whose teaching and baptism they were following – so Paul urges them to be united, to follow Christ, not him, which leads us to today's reading. I like to start at verse 17, and this is Paul speaking. "for Christ did not send me to baptise but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power. For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."

Paul then goes on to quote from Isaiah chapter 29:14. A quick flip back in our bibles to that verse, and we see that it is all about the state of the heart. Verse 13 says that they did all the right things, said all the right words, but their heart was not with God. That sounds so much like the Jewish leaders described in the New Testament, and so many today too. Verse 14 tells us that God did wonder after wonder for them – just look at what he did to get them out of Egypt! Yet STILL their heart was not with God. Their wisdom was upside down and would die a death. Verse 16 says that the potter doesn't turn around and say to the potter "you didn't make me", yet that is what Israel did again and again when they turned away from God. "I will destroy their wisdom" says God.

Why is it so important to know what Isaiah was saying? Because Paul, who knew the Jewish scriptures inside-out, who was a zealot and a pharisee, thought that it was important enough to quote, to give meaning to what he said. This was not just a random quote, added in the hope that it would impress his readers. They also would have known their scriptures and understand the message behind it.

Paul is saying – their heart is not with God. Their worldly wisdom and demand for signs would die, but God's love will live on. So who were the wise man, the scholar, and the philosopher?

Well, this is first century Corinth, so the wise man would have been the Gentile philosophers, the teachers – the Jewish leaders, and the philosophers probably the Greek Sophists, who loved to debate at length. All three were examples of leaders of were venerated, especially the Greek philosophers who were revered. They were the pop-stars of the day. Please hung upon their every word, and even had busts of their favourites. The philosophers had something to say on everything, from politics to household rules, some of which still influence us today. The people Paul was writing to would have known all this. Then, it is all turned on its head – God makes a fool of their wisdom, for it is still the heart that matters. The Jews were still demanding signs, and the Greeks their philosophy, but Paul preaches Christ Crucified – Christ who died as if a common criminal, THAT is the stumbling block. The Jews wanted a warrior Saviour, one who would oust the Romans; and foolishness to the Greeks? Well, only a common criminal would be crucified. What foolishness to trust a criminal! To worship a God who allowed his son to die, cursed for hanging on a tree. Paul was telling the Corinthians that they needed to turn their thinking on its head. The wisdom of the world will pass, but not the wisdom of God.

Oh, but we have hope! Such hope!

But wait! Where else have we heard the Jews demanding signs, other than in Isaiah? Our Gospel reading today is one of my favourites. Gentle Jesus meek and mild he was not!

It sounds so tame when we read it doesn't it, but I want you to feel, just for a moment, Jesus's anger and hurt. This was the temple – his Father's house. Holy ground. Technically they were doing as commanded in Deuteronomy, selling livestock ready for the Passover sacrifice, and changing money into temple gold, but the issue isn't what they were doing, though I imagine that there would have been eyebrows raised at the price they charged, just like today, when a 50p bottle of water costs you £2.50 at a festival!

No, the issue was *where* they were operating. They were in the Outer Temple. That isn't just outside the Temple, like a churchyard, that is the court where the Gentiles were permitted to worship. The *only* place where Gentiles were permitted to worship. By allowing the traders into this part of the Temple, the Jews, whom God had commissioned to be a blessing to all nations, were effectively prohibiting the Gentiles from worshipping God. I mean, not only would it have been incredibly noisy and crowded, but, I don't know how many of you have spent time in a farmyard, but I'm a country girl, and let me tell you, you can't toilet train cattle. And when you group together so many animals, and surround them with noisy shouting humans, they suddenly need the toilet. A lot. Can you, as Gentiles, imagine trying to worship God in that environment?

It's not wonder that Jesus gets mad! What a mess they had made of his father's house! I'd have been pretty mad too. So what does Jesus do? Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, fashions a whip – and uses it. He drives out the sheep, cattle, and traders. What chaos must have ensued on the narrow streets of Jerusalem. A Jerusalem crowded for Passover – there would have been a fair few animals let loose that day!

And what was the response of the Jews? Well, tellingly, they didn't shout about the disrupted trade. No! They wanted a miracle to prove that Jesus had the authority to do such a thing.

We are back to Paul's words again – the Jews will demand miracles!

And how does Jesus respond? By foretelling, in a riddle, his death and resurrection. Destroy this temple and I will raise it again in three days.

The wise did not understand these foolish words. What folly is this? To follow one, crucified as if a criminal. Cursed is he who is hung on a tree, as Deuteronomy 21:23 tells us. The Messiah crucified? What foolishness!

But the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom.

What weakness! To have allowed himself captured! The Messiah will come to free us from the Tyranny of the Romans!

But the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.

Jesus told them from the start! The cross might seem foolish to those who only want to see as the world sees, but the cross, in all its power, is only the half. Christ crucified, and in 3 days, the temple, that is Christ, rebuilt. It is the resurrection that breaks the curse.

But we are still in Lent, let's not yet rush to Easter day. Let us dwell on Jesus. Let us dwell on Jesus' death and what it means. What does this foolishness mean to us today? Is it still foolishness to the world? Has anyone ever told you that Christianity was a crutch? That only the weak-minded believe in God? In this modern world, we do not need God. Do we still believe this Godly foolishness? Read on – and I would always encourage you to read around the passage – verse 27 tells us, God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.

What does this say to us? How should we be in response to this? Should we be demanding signs and wonders in order to believe? Should we be seeking wisdom, using our knowledge – and I say this as one who is studying! Or should we be a people who recognise the power of the cross. Who see Christ crucified and see the power and wisdom of God, even if we do not, and cannot, understand it in its fullness.

In Christ is wisdom and power. God knew what he was doing – if only we had eyes to see and ears to hear.

Lord, give us eyes to see and ears to hear, that we might see and know that your foolishness and weakness are wiser and stronger than anything we have to offer. Let our hearts respond to your message, which turns to views of this world on their heads and transforms us into a people living for you.

Amen.