

Sermon Hetty Lalleman

<sup>18</sup> 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.

<sup>23</sup> ... but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, <sup>24</sup> but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

Not long ago, I visited an exhibition in the British museum. It was about the Roman army. In one part, there was some explanation about how the Romans punished some people. The worst, most despised and most cruel death, was death by crucifixion, a notice said. There was even a skeleton of a man who was crucified, when I remember well, in the first Century AD. There was a wooden nail still visible in one of his ankles.

There are not many illustrations or pictures of Roman crucifixions, because it was regarded too shameful to talk about.

A cross meant the most shameful death for a human being, as I said. The Roman author Cicero, who wrote about 100 years before Paul, says that it is the worst form of execution.

From the third century AD we have one caricature of a crucified person – *no more*. And yet... here we are, reading Paul's message that he preached to the Corinthians – and to us today: 2:5: 'I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.'

A crucified Saviour, the Lord Jesus, God's promised Messiah/Christ – who on earth would ever invent anything like that? It was an appalling message in the eyes of the world that God would save people through a cross. It is a stumbling-block to Jews, Paul writes, and foolishness to Gentiles...

And for us today: it goes against our opinions about what is strong and mighty and influential in this world. It is a very counter-cultural message in a world where celebrities are the people who are 'celebrated', and the royals, and the strong, successful footballers and other sports people...

Why did Paul write this passage? What did he want to explain to the Christians in Corinth?

At that time in Corinth there were, as Pieter explained last week, several divisions. Those who followed Apollos, or Cephas, or Paul. But there is more...

In the rest of the letter, Paul addresses a number of issues that divided the church. There were groups who thought of themselves as wise. They thought that they knew God in a special way, and that others didn't. In Paul's letter we see that these people are creating confusion in the church.

They pride themselves on spiritual gifts, as becomes clear in one of the later chapters of this letter to the Corinthians. There we also read that they doubt Paul's apostleship, they think that he is weak. They claim to be wise. They claim that here on earth they have already achieved perfection. They prefer no longer to talk about the cross of Christ, because that has to do with weakness.

In contrast, then, Paul focuses everything on the crucified Jesus. Even when we believe in the resurrection, it is Christ's death on the **cross** that receives its affirmation and full meaning through the resurrection. We must never forget the cross!

The cross is of vital importance. That seems to be very unlikely. It is totally opposed to the wisdom of the world, as Paul says.

Verse 21 says that those who believe were saved only through the foolishness of what was preached. Through the message of the crucified Christ.

Chapter 2:9 says: 'What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard,  
and what no human mind has conceived' – the things God has prepared for those who love him.'

For Jews a crucified person was cursed by God, someone deserted by God.

Paul says that Jews find a crucified Messiah offensive. The NT tells us several times that the people expected Jesus to establish a kingdom. They expected a triumphant Messiah. Yet on the cross all that seems to come to an end. Who can see God at work in the cross?

However... some people have discovered what the cross means for them. Paul writes [2:10]: 'these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit.'

There are people who have realised that the cross is the only way of salvation. They were confronted with Christ and saw that all their ways of self-realisation were cul-de-sacs.

When you meet Jesus, you understand that you were kidding yourself when you thought that you could stand right before God in your own power. He shows us who we are: people without God, who placed ourselves in the centre. But *only* by the death of Jesus, God has reconciled us with Himself. He does not count our sins if we put our trust in Jesus.

When we accept the death of Jesus for us, it opens the way to a new life. A life in which He is the centre and not us. That brings to an end our self-esteem, our self-righteousness.

Once you have been to the cross, you have discovered yourself with all your pretences and your attempts to prove yourself before God and others.

*At the cross* you stand exposed. You can't keep up appearances. *At the cross* you see very clearly the state you are in, the state humans are in. You see that the only person who can reconnect you with God, is God Himself, in Christ. The initiative is entirely his.

Once we acknowledge our dependence on God in this way, once we acknowledge that our life without Him ends in disaster, then God can begin afresh with us. He can give us a life that is as He originally intended it.

In this way the cross turns out to be the road to salvation.

*It is amazing* that the cross is the way in which God brings salvation and redemption! It's the world upside down. It is the end of all human pretence.

What is wisdom in God's eyes – salvation through the cross of Jesus - is exactly the opposite of wisdom in human eyes.

What humans find foolishness - the salvation of the world through the cross - turns out to be God's wisdom. What people call wisdom, what they boast in and are proud of - is foolishness for God.

Paul adds to this, in verses 26-29 - that you can also see that God's approach is opposite to ours when you look at the church. In the church in Corinth there were

some important people, that is what the Book of Acts tells us, but the majority were pretty unremarkable in society. Paul calls them weak, insignificant.

Yet in these very people the power of God becomes visible. It's not that God avoids the rich – but they should not boast of their riches. Or their power, or their wisdom, if they are wise people. God cannot do anything for people who think that they can save themselves and that they can contribute something to God, people who are self-sufficient.

The church in Corinth shows that God sets to work with people who are considered foolish and insignificant by the world. In this way God puts the nobility, the wise, the influencers to shame.

Before God, nobody can boast of their money or their wisdom or their power. Pride has no place with Him. Verse 31 says: 'Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.' If you are looking for honour anywhere, do find it in God, because all honour is his. Don't be proud of what you have of yourself, but only boast of God and of what Jesus did on the cross

All this is also visible in the way in which Paul proclaimed the gospel, he explains in the passage we read, 1 Corinthians 2:1-5. The content of *the gospel* was the crucified Christ. But the form of *Paul's preaching* also illustrated that it was all about God and not about himself. Paul did not come with beautiful words. He was not an impressive appearance. He did not use any wise, persuasive speeches, something the Greek people, who lived in Corinth, loved. Paul's preaching, he says, was not eloquent, he came with fear and trembling, not an impressive personality.

But: he spoke in God's power. He proclaimed only the crucified Christ. That means that when people became believers, it was God's work and not his. It was not because Paul was such a good speaker. He did not want to bind people to himself, so that they would believe him because of his rhetorical skills. He wanted to bind people to Jesus Christ.

Again, that is the opposite of what is usually valued in the world, then and now. You can see that in the elections, in America and here. Rhetorical language is valued, those who speak convincingly get the votes.

But Paul never set out to bind people to himself, he never wanted people to celebrate him as a great speaker and preacher.

His humble way of speaking and his actions were in accordance with his message. It all seemed insignificant: his words, his message of the cross, the people to whom he speaks in Corinth...

Yet, that is the only way in which the Corinthians Christians were saved. Paul only wanted to preach the foolishness of the cross, so that people would confess Jesus Christ as their Saviour and know that no wisdom of themselves could bring them closer to God. It turns out that the cross is the victory over everything that goes against God. It turns out that the cross is the power of God to save people.

As a Christian you know from experience that only such a radical choice for God makes it possible to lead a new life, to really change your mindset. All other roads on which we look for God are dead ends. They only make us improve the façade; they don't bring a lasting change of heart, of your life.

The cross redirects our life towards God. The cross has become the power of God to us, the centre of our life. We would only make it powerless if we tried to merge it with human wisdom. The cross is the end all our self-glory. We do not find our salvation in ourselves, but in Christ. That is God's wisdom. The only one who deserves honour is God.

'Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.'