

## **1 Corinthians 1:23-24**

**But we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.**

A recent survey by TEAR Fund of 7,000 people discovered

- That just over half the people surveyed described themselves as Christian
- Although that might not be as bad as some of us thought
- It does represent a marked drop in people describing themselves as Christian
- Since the last census was taken
- Although two out of three people said they believe in God and pray
- In Britain only about 7.5 million people attend church regularly
- Putting Britain in the bottom four of European countries for Christian observance

The situation that the Apostle Paul encountered at Corinth

- Is clearly a different context from the early growth that the church experienced
- At Jerusalem or even in Thessalonica
- The Pentecost story (Acts 2) tells of thousands being added to the church daily
- While twenty years later, the gospel was received with enthusiasm in Thessalonica
- And this is reported in Paul's letter to the Thessalonian Christians (1 Thess. 1)

Corinth was a cosmopolitan environment with a mix of people of many ethnic groups

- It was a rich and prosperous city and had many fine buildings
- Recreational pursuits could be followed in the games (second only to the Olympics)
- In the many drinking houses at the harbours
- While popular religion could be found at the temple of Aphrodite
- A shrine with more than 1000 women prostitutes
- It was a city notorious for sexual immorality and corruption

When he visited Corinth, Jewish opposition forced Paul to move to the house of Titus Justus

- Later the news he received from the church was of power struggles and factions
- Chaotic services, immature and undisciplined members
- And even a case of gross immorality within the church

Against such a background there was a need for Paul to get the people to re-focus

- It is not an unfamiliar task for the church today
- We are undoubtedly living in a cosmopolitan society
- One that suggests that all religious and ethical claims are equally valid
- We live in a society that on the one hand has an obsession with sports and fitness
- And on the other hand is enslaved to over-indulgence of many kinds
- In excessive drinking, in regular over-eating of unhealthy foods
- And in an obsession with personal fulfilment through sexual activity
- Add to this corruption at just about every level of society
- And we find that we are not all that different from Corinth

I don't know if Paul is being consulted about the problems of the church

- Perhaps some are urging him to update his methods or accommodate other ideas
- He certainly has two major groups (Jews and Greeks) and their ideas in mind

## I JEWS DEMAND MIRACULOUS SIGNS

The Jews were seeking dramatic, miraculous signs to identify the Messiah

- They believed that the Messiah would bring an apocalyptic deliverance
- The miracles of Jesus were not enough – indeed they ascribed these to Satan
- They wanted a sign from heaven – something clearly from God
- Jesus resolutely refused the request for such a sign because it arose from unbelief
- Jesus said that the only sign they would be given is the sign of the prophet Jonah
- But this would only point to his death as Messiah

The Jews did not accept that his death was a sign of his Messiahship

- Rather they viewed the crucifixion as proof that Jesus had been cursed by God
- For as the scriptures say
- ‘anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse’ (Deut. 21:23)

The issue of Jesus’ true identity was critical

- When Jesus was forced to appear before the Jewish ruling council

... both the chief priests and teachers of the law, met together, and Jesus was led before them. "If you are the Christ," they said, "tell us."

Jesus answered, "If I tell you, you will not believe me, and if I asked you, you would not answer. But from now on, the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God."

They all asked, "Are you then the Son of God?"

He replied, "You are right in saying I am."

Then they said, "Why do we need any more testimony? We have heard it from his own lips."

(Luke 22:66-71)

When Jesus affirmed that he was the Son of God

- That was either a most hideous blasphemy or it was true
- Without a sign from heaven to confirm that it was true
- They considered him guilty as a blasphemer and worthy of death

There is no doubt that God may choose to grant signs that people will believe (John 20:31)

- Indeed, the resurrection of Jesus is the greatest of any such signs
- But God does not supply signs on demand
- And insists that people have enough evidence for belief without them (John 20:29)

In today’s church, there will always be some who say

- If only we had more signs and wonders then more people would believe
- But it is not our place to demand that God must work a miracle
- Or claiming that if he doesn’t someone in the transaction does not have enough faith
- Neither must we pretend to know that God no longer works miracles
- Or, as some might say, that he never worked them in the first place
- It is not our place to demand signs or wonders
- Certainly, not over and above those that we have been given

## II GREEKS LOOK FOR WISDOM

Although Paul uses the word 'Greeks' (meaning the native Greeks of Corinth)

- In a broader sense he is referring to the whole non-Jewish (or Gentile) world
- In the very next verse (23) he uses 'Gentiles' instead of 'Greeks'

The contrast between Jews and Greeks or Gentiles is plain enough

- So is the contrast between miraculous signs and wisdom
- Many Greeks considered speculative philosophies as the highest of human ideals
- Paul reminds them that in God's all-wise purpose
- People did not come to know God through their philosophy or religious wisdom

For Greeks, the whole idea of God becoming a man in the incarnation

- Would have been difficult to accept – it did not fit in with their world view
- Neither would they have found the idea of God in Christ atoning for sin easy

Although not tried before Greeks, Jesus was tried by Romans and their governor Pilate

- Pilate could cope neither with Jesus' claims to absolute truth
- Nor his kingship being not of this world
- For Greeks and all Gentiles – his crucifixion (death on the cross)
- Was a stumbling-block (Gk skandalon – literally a scandal) and foolishness

In short, many Greeks would have found numerous aspects of the gospel story foolish

- God who is spirit taking human flesh (his incarnation)
- A suffering God (his passion)
- A saviour who is crucified (his atoning death)
- His bodily rising rather than, at best, continued spiritual existence (his resurrection)
- A way to God based not on human speculation (the gospel as revelation)

If all this sounds strangely familiar, it is because such ideas are prevalent today

- Sadly, not only outside of the church but also within it
- In my lifetime we have moved from a stage
- Where it was fashionable to deny the incarnation
- Particularly belief in the virginal conception
- which historically has been such an important key to our understanding of it
- Through an era, particularly with Bishop Jenkins
- Where it was fashionable to deny the bodily resurrection
- Particularly belief in the empty tomb
- Which historically has been such an important key to our understanding of it
- And even this week the substitutionary nature of Christ's death has been attacked
- By a leading Anglican churchman
- Not least because it does not equate with his idea of God
- As someone said with some subtlety
- God created man in his own image
- and man has been returning the compliment ever since – if that needs spelling out
- it is very easy for us to make God in our own image – often in the name of wisdom

Paul establishes that God's salvation is not found through wisdom

- the wise man (probably a Greek), the scholar (possibly a Jew skilled in the law)
- the philosopher of this age – who wants to dispute every issue and solve it by reason
- such a description could fit Jew or Greek
- their wisdom is foolish, but God's 'foolishness' is wise

### III BUT WE PREACH CHRIST CRUCIFIED

Here is the heart of the Christian message

- we need to be aware that godlessness takes subtle forms
- some people simply reject God outright
- others look for him in the wrong places
- whether by demanding miraculous signs (as New Testament Jews did)
- or engaging in speculative philosophies (as New Testament Gentiles did)
- or they might simply remake God in their own image
- which, rightly speaking, is not God at all but an idol
- but whether it equates with fashionable philosophy or not

we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

The true gospel is the message centred on the cross

- the wisdom of the wise man, the intelligence of the intelligent are frustrated
- this is not to discount God-given Christian wisdom or scholarship
- but it is to show that the gospel message cannot be unravelled by worldly thinking
- it is given to us by divine revelation
- people in their fallen, worldly wisdom reject God
- to such people, God's plan of salvation seems foolish
- but in his foreknowledge God had anticipated this all along
- so that the plan of salvation could never be a human invention
- but must always be 'the wisdom of God'

It is not new now and it was not unknown then

- people will respond in different ways to the scandal of the cross
- by human thinking the whole plan of salvation is so preposterous
- that one wonders why people (especially within the church)
- try to dismantle it bit by bit
- the response to the scandal of the cross puts us on a journey
- those who are perishing and those who are being saved

To explain this Paul uses a special kind overstatement (called hyperbole)

- God's weakness – that is his smallest, most insignificant thought
- Is more worthwhile than even the wisest plans of mankind
- His foolishness (which relatively speaking is, of course, not foolishness at all)
- Is wiser than the greatest of human wisdom
- In the Gentile world, the cross was foolishness (criminals died on crosses)
- How could someone put to death by crucifixion be the Saviour?

In the contemporary church, in today's world, our eyes must be open to the danger

- The subtle temptation to do something other than preach Christ crucified
- The temptation to abandon preaching in the church is not a new one
- A statement of the continued importance of preaching in the present age
- Must belong to another occasion – though it is clear that the two go together
- Nevertheless the responsibility is to preach Christ crucified

It is easy to say that the church will grow if there were more miraculous signs

- It is easy to be immersed in a world of learning and scholarship
- That slowly dismantles the Christian gospel of the crucified Christ
- It is easy to adopt the strategies of the market place for church growth
- To shrink back from prayer, Bible study, repentance, faith and Christian maturity
- But salvation is in Christ (and him crucified) not in the wisdom of men

Preaching Christ crucified is no guarantee of popularity, wisdom, power or fortune

- Authentic Christianity stands opposed to the values of a fallen sinful world
- If we attempt to make the gospel less of a scandal
- It will only become distorted and powerless
- False religion is ultimately known by its fruits (or its fruitlessness)

Christ's death is not simply the death of a hero, or a martyr, or an example

- his death is that of a sin-bearer, a sacrifice and a substitute
- and those whom the Spirit of God touches and convicts
- will find in the cross the godly wisdom and power to transform their lives
- believers can only ever come to faith by focusing on the cross

The great evangelists of history have all centred on the cross

- and the need for conversion
- and from the beginning countless numbers have come to Christ by preaching

The mysterious nature between the Father and the Son is beyond our comprehension

- but the wrath of God and the love of God are not at odds with each other
- neither must we be misled by simplistic ideas of the angry father and the punished son
- instead with the Apostle Paul we celebrate

God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

(2 Corinthians 5:19-21)

By the considered and definite act of repentance and faith, we can be at peace with God

- and by personal invitation, or through their difficult personal circumstances
- we can begin to share with others the message of Christ crucified