

“ASPECTS OF THE CROSS – 1”
1 Corinthians 1:1-31

(Apologies to those who have heard this story before – not many, I suspect, as it was during an evening service.)

Norman was an unassuming young man. He worked in the family business, lived with his Mum and Dad, got on with life like most of his friends and contemporaries. He was a bit of a deep thinker and didn't spend quite as much time at parties as the others, but he seemed fairly harmless. As he grew up, though, he started to go a bit weird – in fact, later in his life, even his brothers called him mad. Eventually, when he was in his late twenties, he gave up his job and started travelling about talking about injustice and evil.

There seemed to be about Norman a sense of destiny. He appeared so sure of what he was saying that he was prepared to challenge anyone – lawyers, religious leaders, politicians, the rich and the powerful. He told stories and was even reputed to be able to do magic, which some people put down to links with the occult. Many people – especially the poor and those on the edges of society – saw him as a kind of “Robin Hood” character, sympathetic to them and always ready to help. Some of the radicals in the part of the world where he lived latched on to him and started to follow him around, listening to his ideas and trying to imitate him. There were some people that he managed to attract just by the way in which he lived – rootless and yet focussed on a new kind of society.

Quite naturally, he also made a lot of enemies. Powerful people, rich people, people with reputations, who saw him as a threat. But Norman kept on having a go at them, barging into their meetings, standing outside their places of worship, weaving them into his stories to make his audiences laugh at them. The trouble was, he never actually did anything that was strictly illegal. There were always spies, policemen, lawyers trying to catch him out. But he was just too clever for them.

Eventually, his enemies had had enough and they set him up. They managed to find a few people who had become disillusioned with Norman and a few of their own people who were easily bribed. Norman was arrested on a technicality, which had no hope of success in the courts, but once they had him there, they made up some other charges, rigged the trial and he was sentenced to death in the electric chair. It was no big deal, really: hundreds, thousands of people were executed like that every year.

His mother and a couple of other people were allowed into the observation chamber to watch. A few people who were glad to see him go stood around outside the prison where he was being held and as he was led across the yard to the block with the chair inside they shouted abuse at him. Once inside he was strapped into the chair and the few observers watched as the switch was thrown and his body convulsed with the current. His expression of terror and pain as the electricity surged through him would stay in their minds for ever. Then he slumped back, dead, and one of his supporters – not, strangely, one of his family – was ushered in to remove the body and take it off for burial.

For a while it seemed as if the movement that Norman had initiated had died out with him. But after a few weeks his supporters began to travel around taking up where he had left off, really. They were identified by the symbol which they adopted as their kind of badge – a little stylised electric chair, a reminder of how he had died. Sometimes they would scrawl it in chalk on the outside of a building where they were going to meet. If they felt some kind of evil threatening them, they would try to ward it off with the sign of the chair. Some people had little gold chairs made and they wore them on chains round their necks. Other people had them printed on t-shirts with what they thought were witty slogans. As the movement grew and they started to buy property, you could always tell their meeting halls by the electric chair over the door, sometimes with an effigy of Norman in it, sometimes empty. They adapted old folk songs and sang about the chair, and how Norman had been executed in it. Eventually, people forgot just what a horrific instrument of torture and execution it actually was and the chair became a fashionable item of jewellery.

What a stupid story! Imagine people walking round thinking that kind of thing about an electric chair. What a bunch of morons! But as you have probably already worked out, substitute Jesus for Norman and cross for electric chair, and you have the story that is at the heart of our own faith (with a few other very important bits and pieces added on as well). And your reaction to the followers of Norman, who set so much store by the chair – “a bunch of morons” – is exactly the kind of reaction Paul was writing about in that short extract from the letter he wrote to some Christians in Corinth more or less two thousand years ago. In fact, one of the words used is the very word which gives us our word “moron” – the Greek word “*moria*”: folly, stupidity, madness. Down through the centuries people have considered the followers of Jesus the Christ – Christians – as nutters, morons, because of our emphasis on the cross.

We are so used to it now – in churches, on buildings, as a fashion item, as a symbol – that we forget it is actually a means of execution. Most crosses would be stained with blood and gore. They would stink of the sweat and blood and waste of men who had been nailed there to die. They were a sign of humiliation, pain and defeat. They were certainly not symbols of victory and power – quite the opposite, in fact. And so, when Peter and Paul and their colleagues went around preaching about the cross on which Jesus had died, and all that it meant for them, people thought they were morons.

In Corinth – and many other places to which Paul and the others travelled – there were highly intellectual Greeks who were amazed that anyone could trust in the power of anything or anyone represented by such a symbol. They were into concepts and ideas and all kinds of pure philosophy. The grotesque reminder of the execution of the founder of the religion was certainly not the way to proclaim a message that would appeal to anyone with any sense – and they should know, because they were the sensible ones. They were looking for a philosophy, not a folk hero; a genius, not a victim. It was laughable that someone who was offering a way to understand life, the universe and everything, who was claiming to provide a means of escaping the consequences of evil and injustice, should himself not have the common sense to avoid the evil and injustice of being crucified.

And there were also Jewish people who were shocked and offended by the thought that their Messiah – for that is who Jesus had claimed to be – should end up nailed to a cross. Apart from their idea that anyone who was nailed up like that was actually cursed, they couldn't get their heads round the idea that this Messiah did not simply demonstrate his awesome power and destroy anyone and anything that stood in his way. It was actually offensive to them that they should be asked to commit themselves to someone who had died on a cross. It was, to translate the Greek word rendered in the NIV as “*stumbling block*” literally, a “*scandal*”. Anyone who tried to suggest otherwise was a fool – and for them a fool was not just someone stupid, but someone evil and godless.

And had Paul been writing that letter today he would doubtless have faced the same problem, although expressed in different ways. Those who follow the way of the cross, who commit themselves to the crucified Messiah are still thought fools. Just as it was contrasted in the first century with the wisdom or the power of those who thought in worldly ways, so today those who denigrate the faith of Christians cannot understand how people can follow a religion which prizes humility above power, which supports the poor and the disadvantaged over against the rich and the powerful, which offers a long-term hope rather than a quick-fix, short-term panacea. [Unfortunately, there are parts of the Christian church itself which has got sucked in to power games and empire building, individual Christians who put their own personal comfort and prosperity above the clear teaching of Jesus, rather than themselves following Jesus' command in *Luke 9:23* to take up their own cross day by day.]

But still, the cross is at the heart of our faith. It's there on our logo: it's up on the wall: it's in our songs and hymns: it's in our art and our stories: it's on our jewellery and our tattoos. For Paul it was what being a follower of Jesus was all about – he writes in *Galatians 6:14*, “*May I never boast except in **the cross** of our Lord Jesus Christ,*” and in the next chapter of this letter to Corinth, “*I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him **crucified.***” Wherever you look, Paul is preaching and writing about the cross. In *Colossians* it is the means of God's reconciliation of everything to himself, God's way

of putting right all that has gone wrong in the universe. In the gospels, Jesus is always looking forward to the cross and, as we've already said, his command to those who want to follow him is that they should also take up their cross each and every day, that they should be ready and willing to sacrifice everything for him.

But strangely, for a symbol of humility and powerlessness, it has become a powerful symbol in and of itself. When you think about it, it is the cross on the hill rather than the Sermon on the Mount that has produced the impact of Christianity on the world. It may be folly. The world may think of us as a bunch of sad morons who follow a crucified and defeated leader, who proclaim our allegiance to him and identify ourselves to each other with the sign of his death and humiliation, but it's one of the many paradoxes of our faith that in that symbol of weakness and folly there is actually infinite power and infinite wisdom.

It was on the cross that Jesus defeated evil. That's why Paul writes here that *"to us who are being saved, it is the power of God."* Jesus hung on the cross as a kind of lightning conductor for evil. As he hung there, fully **human** in every way, he took on himself all the evil that assaults humanity. In his human body he experienced all the dark forces that could possibly confront us. And as he hung there, fully **divine** in every way, he ensured that never again could evil have the upper hand. Because of the death of Jesus on the cross, you and I can know that evil can never fully overcome us. If we believe in Jesus, if we accept that he hung on that cross for us and for all creation, then we can know his power in our lives to overcome temptation and to offer forgiveness. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews puts it like this (*Hebrews 2:14*), *"Jesus too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power over death."*

And Paul tells the Christians in Corinth that this is actually God's wisdom, too. The cross is not a supreme act of folly, a horrendous aberration in the history of the world, the point at which everything went wrong. It's been part of God's plan for ever. This is what God intended – the only wise God. Paul wrote a letter to the Ephesians which is full of references to God's plan and to his will. It's what he wanted, what he had intended since before the world was even created. In Peter's first letter (*1 Peter 1:20*), he says the same thing: *"Jesus was chosen before the creation of the world"*, and he writes it in the context of a passage about sacrifice.

In this cross, in this symbol of weakness and defeat, of folly and waste, is true wisdom and power. Those who want to see it as a symbol of folly and the followers of Jesus as poor, deluded morons – well, for them it is indeed a symbol of folly. But for those who accept what's behind it, who see in the cross the eternal wisdom of God being used to defeat the powers of evil, then it became a source of wisdom and of power.

Without the cross there is nothing. The cross is what unites us as his people. Paul writes in this chapter about the factions that were appearing in the Christian community at Corinth – just as they have appeared in Christian communities down through history. It's what these two letters to the Corinthians are all about. And right at the beginning of the first letter, in amongst all the stuff about different groups and the problems he is going to address in the rest of the letter, he puts down this marker: it's the cross that is at the centre. It's the cross that is our unifying symbol. You can argue all you want about the Holy Spirit, about the use of gifts, about the leadership of the Church, about the way you do your worship – but if you haven't got the cross at the very heart of it all, you're wasting your time. It never does any harm to get back to what it's really all about – which is why we're going to remind ourselves of some aspects of it during Lent this year..

It stands at the heart of history, the pivotal point. It represents a real, historical event, not a concept or a movement or a theory or a hypothesis, but the sacrifice of the Son of God as a means of reconciling you, me, humanity, creation to God. Without the cross, that reconciliation could not take place. In this month's edition of *Third Way* there's an interview that Steve Turner conducted with Bishop Gene Robinson, who has been at the centre of controversy in the USA and in the Anglican communion. Steve

Turner asked him what he would say if someone came to him and asked, “*What must I do to be saved?*” The Bishop’s response was, “*Believe that God loves you beyond your wildest imagining, and begin to live your life as if that were true.*” When he was pressed as to whether that left out the cross, Gene Robinson went on, “*The cross represents the lengths to which God was willing to go to save us from a life that is captive to sin and death. Jesus accomplished something on the cross that changed the world completely.*”

“*It changed the world completely.*” But has it changed you? Does the cross mean anything to you? Or is your Christianity to do with a whole load of other things – just like those things which were preoccupying the Corinthians – to the extent that you’ve really forgotten all about the cross and what it means? Without the cross we are left with no hope, no future. Evil will overpower us. Sin will enslave and destroy us. Without the cross we can never hope to experience the love and grace and mercy of God. It means something. It is not folly. Those who stand before it and pledge their lives to the Messiah hanging on it are not fools, because we believe that through the cross – and only through the cross – there is hope for eternity. The fools are those who will not accept what God holds out to them – the offer of salvation, the offer of forgiveness, the offer of eternal life. There’s nothing to lose, except your pride and your punishment. Jim Elliot was a young missionary who gave up everything to go and tell the Huaorani [Auca] Indians in Ecuador about Jesus and his love for them. In January 1956, at the age of 28, he was murdered by them. In his journal for October 28th 1949 he wrote the oft-quoted words: “*He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.*” Who is the fool this morning?

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We are so used to it the cross as a symbol of our faith that we forget it was actually an instrument of torture and execution, a sign of humiliation, pain and defeat. It was certainly not a symbol of victory and power. So, when the apostles preached about the cross on which Jesus had died, and all that it meant for them, people thought they were, quite literally "morons" (the Greek word Paul use for "folly").

The highly intellectual Greeks in Corinth were amazed that anyone could trust in the power of anything or anyone represented by such a symbol. And the Jewish people were shocked and offended by the thought that their Messiah – for that is who Jesus had claimed to be – should end up nailed to a cross. And had Paul been writing this letter today he would doubtless have faced the same problem, although expressed in different ways. Those who follow the way of the cross, who commit themselves to the crucified Messiah are still thought fools. Just as it was contrasted in the first century with the wisdom or the power of those who thought in worldly ways, so today those who denigrate the faith of Christians cannot understand how people can follow a religion which prizes humility above power, which supports the poor and the disadvantaged over against the rich and the powerful, which offers a long-term hope rather than a quick-fix, short-term panacea.

But still, the cross is at the heart of our faith. For Paul it was what being a follower of Jesus was all about (see *Galatians 6:14*, *1 Corinthians 2:2*). Wherever you look, Paul is preaching and writing about the cross. In *Colossians* it is the means of God's reconciliation of everything to himself. Jesus is always looking forward to the cross and his command to those who want to follow him is that they should also take up their cross each and every day.

It was on the cross that Jesus defeated evil. It's been part of God's plan for ever. It stands at the heart of history, the pivotal point. It represents a real, historical event, not a concept or a movement or a theory or a hypothesis, but the sacrifice of the Son of God as a means of reconciling you, me, humanity, creation to God. The fools are those who will not accept what God holds out to them – the offer of salvation, the offer of forgiveness, the offer of eternal life. *"He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose."* (Jim Elliott)

For reflection and discussion

1. Do you ever stop to think what the a cross was actually used for?
2. Why do we have the cross as the symbol of our faith?
3. What does the cross mean to you?
4. When Bishop Robinson was asked how he would reply to the question, *"What must I do to be saved?"* he said, *"Believe that God loves you beyond your wildest imagining, and begin to live your life as if that were true ... The cross represents the lengths to which God was willing to go to save us from a life that is captive to sin and death. Jesus accomplished something on the cross that changed the world completely."* How would you reply?
5. What did Jesus mean when he said that his followers need to take up their cross each day (*Luke 9:23*)?
6. Lent is a period of time that enables us to reflect on and prepare for the events of Good Friday and Easter. How are you going to use that time? (Don't feel you have to answer this question in the group, but give it serious thought nonetheless.)