

Proclaiming Christ Crucified

Light, Grace, and Peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

And I, when I came to you, brothers (and sisters), did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him"- these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.

Prayer:

Lord, we pray for the wisdom of your Holy Spirit to fill and lead us now as we speak and listen to your Word. Amen.

Dear Congregation!

To begin with, a few cutting questions: What is the Gospel for someone, who suffers from mental illness, not able to cope with everyday life because of a genetic fault or chemical imbalance in the brain? What is the Gospel for someone who is plagued daily by debilitating illness and pain? What is the Gospel for someone who is self-destructing by abusing alcohol or drugs, or who contemplates even to take her own life because she cannot see any other way? Which intelligent and well thought out theological doctrines and nicely

and neatly compiled spiritual wisdom does one say to a person in these and other extremely painful circumstances?

Even though he was a very intelligent and well-educated man, even Paul had great difficulties in wowing the crowds in Corinth with lofty wisdom speech and intelligent theological systems of beliefs. Because in the Corinthian church there was a great emphasis put on noticeable and showy spiritual gifts, for example speaking in tongues, that were seen as proof that the Holy Spirit dwelt within a person. Also, deep knowledge and wisdom were great ideals to strive for too, and they were even a requirement for accepting any speaker or preacher. With this tall order Paul was not really all that interesting when he came with his clear but very simple message: Christ crucified for us! That was not a very popular message in Corinth and not exactly what the Corinthians wanted to hear. A weak God, crucified to death! Not very attractive! Sadly, we can find that this is true among Christians and Christian churches even to this day.

The cross, pain and suffering, are often overplayed with lovely bible verses and well thought out theological sentences that seem to avoid the reality of a difficult and painful situation. And yes, even preachers and apostles do that. Often out of a feeling of helplessness and desperation in a difficult or sad situation. And also, nobody wants to feel weak and helpless. Every person wants to feel strong and competent and capable in any given situation. It has always been like that: people strive for strength and admire deep knowledge and wisdom. It has always been the striving of human reason to make God look reasonable, to make Him look good and acceptable by human standards. What came from that is a great number of lists with theological proposals about who and what God is, and most importantly how to get people to be happy about them and agree on this list of theological statements so that the church can put its stamp of approval on it. It's like with a

simple pocket knife. Originally it was just a pocket knife, nothing else. Then clever innovators came along and added more and more fancy tools to the pocket knife, so much so that it becomes hard to recognize it as pocket knife anymore. The original intent of the pocket knife – the knife, is hardly recognizable amongst all the other gadgets.

Paul (and after Paul, also Martin Luther) wanted not only to make the cross recognizable again, but to bring it to the centre of all preaching of the Gospel. For them the Gospel is the Cross, Christ crucified, dead and buried – for us! And no human wisdom or clever rational thought or spiritual ecstasy can explain or uncover this hidden reality of God; there can be no boasting in spiritual leaders whose speech is lofty and eloquent and thereby putting confidence in human wisdom and strength. Paul and Luther brought our attention back to the fact that we do not rely on human accomplishment, but only on what Christ has accomplished for us on the Cross.

It is God that, in the death of Christ, came down into the deep and dark reality of human suffering, of human weakness and shame. "I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling", Paul writes to the Corinthians and with these words he brings his human experiences in direct relation to the message of the Cross and Christ crucified for us. Nothing else is more important to know or have knowledge of, than to know that Christ was crucified for you! This was a very strange and foreign sounding message in a world that put its confidence squarely on human wisdom and knowledge, back in Paul's day as well as in our world today.

Why does Paul, who is a learned scholar of the Thora, let go of all his knowledge for a message that brings about weakness, fear, and trembling? Because, more than all his gained knowledge and wisdom, Paul knew and experienced this from the core of his being, that he cannot save himself. Studying the law and the scriptures did not bring him salvation. Meeting Christ the Crucified on the

Damascus road was the turning point for him and the realization that nothing could save him except Christ the crucified. That is the message that Paul wanted to share with the high and mighty Corinthians. God is not to be found in human wisdom and rational thought, but in His Son hanging on the Cross. God himself is to be found in that Cross of Christ. Two wooden beams meet in the middle, the place where the heart of the crucified Christ opens, meets, and receives every single human being. From there, from the middle of God's heart is where God's wisdom shines into the world and into our lives. Jesus Christ, the crucified, is the heart of God in our greatest pain and fear, when we feel like our heart is being ripped out of our chest. That is where God meets us! God even meets us in death, through the death of his own beloved Son, Jesus Christ. The suffering and death of Christ on the Cross means that God is intrinsically close to us even in the worst situation that we can imagine. Even death cannot separate us from God's love – because of Christ was crucified and died for us.

That is Gospel, dear congregation! That is deep and real comfort, because it is the only thing that can reach us even in the deepest depths of our despair! And truly, no eye has seen this, nor has any ear heard or heart imagined the love of God reaching this deep into our human reality. No human wisdom or knowledge can reach this far or this deep!

Knowing a God of fiercely power and might would hardly have melted me to happiness. But knowing a God that cares enough to share my suffering makes all the difference. That the Creator of the universe is a loving creator is something I can believe with all my heart.

Whatever we may say about it with our addiction to the way of power, and our cynicism about the softness of love, we must admit that Jesus did way more with that cross to not only shake human history but to touch human hearts, than he ever would have if he had played the revolutionary card calling his people to arms.

That's the way God rules. That's the way he changes things with his cross. And countless souls down through the centuries witnessed that he does it, transforms the heart, as no other power could ever do, not that of the politician or psychiatrist, not that of wealth or weapons. God rules the world with love, changes us, however slowly, subtly, imperceptibly, by self-forgetting love. That's his face... That's his name...

That means we get closest to God as we love as he loves up there on his tree, loving in hurt, the reversal, the rejection, loving in the loneliness, loving the unlovely gathered round. Not many of us will ever quite muster love like that, but we can learn to move in that direction. Someone once said, "When we meet him, God will not look us over for medals, diplomas or degrees, he will look us over for scars like His."

And may the love and peace of God which truly is beyond all our human knowledge and wisdom, guard our hearts and minds in God's wisdom, Christ Jesus, the One who was crucified, for you and me. Amen.