

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen

¹² Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. ¹³ And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual. ¹⁴ Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are discerned spiritually. ¹⁵ Those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else's scrutiny. ¹⁶ 'For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?' But we have the mind of Christ.

Dear Congregation,

Before getting to our text in chapter 2 of the 1st Letter to the Corinthians, I would like to cast a brief look at Chapter 1. In chapter 1 of the Letter to the Corinthians Paul, perhaps to our surprise, says all of this Christian stuff just looks foolish. *"... the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing ..." (v.18) "... Has God not made foolish the wisdom of the world? ..." (v.20) "... God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise ..." (v.27)*

In the second chapter of the 1st Letter to the Corinthians, Paul develops the idea that the wisdom we have is not a natural wisdom, a wisdom the world recognizes. It's a spiritual wisdom; it comes from the Spirit.

- Without the Spirit, we would call the cross foolish.
- Without the Spirit, we would call Jesus foolish.
- Without the Spirit, our eye could not see, our ear could not hear, and our mind could not conceive—could not realize what God has prepared for us.
- Without the Spirit, we go through life wearing a blindfold, headphones, and a hardhat.

.... In Paul's view, it is only through the Spirit of God that believers can come to understand the gift of Christ and its subsequent effects upon a world that is already becoming new. ... Without the Spirit we cannot accept spiritual truths AND we cannot understand them.

These are two distinct though related concepts. Non-Christians do indeed plainly understand the gospel message at times; further, unbelieving Bible scholars do often offer valuable insights into the text. That is not disputed here. Paul's point seems to be that the **depths** of God's ways and God's wisdom cannot even be touched by non-believers.

But let's look at all of this a little differently, in a more 'today'-type of context.

If strangers were to come to this Service, would they understand us? Would they be able to interpret our words, our so-called 'Insider Language'? Would they see whom we mean when we sing: "Come, Holy Spirit?" Would they know what it's all about when we confess: "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian Church"? Would they grasp what we mean when we pray to the Father, and would they know who Jesus is?

During the Service we wouldn't have sufficient opportunity to explain to strangers who the Father is to whom we pray. Between the hymns it's also not possible to explain who the Spirit is in whom we place our trust and hope or what the Holy Christian Church is that we proclaim. And even if the strangers were to stay for coffee afterwards and ask questions – how much can we show them, explain to them in between sips of coffee or tea? If the strangers show an interest in the story of faith and the church we could probably enlighten them on a few aspects. And it's also not so difficult to translate the complicated words of the liturgy. But to explain faith? Is that even possible?

It would **seem** to be possible if we look at the numerous faith courses on offer. And the more the Christian faith and Christian congregations appear to be in the minority, the more

we need to talk about what it is we are teaching. We must tell the many stories of the Bible to others. We need these stories, because in them and through them we begin to recognize ourselves in particular and mankind in general.

And what about the beautiful language of the psalms? People can relate to the poetry and strength revealed in these passages. In talking to others about the psalms we can communicate the beauty and strength that emanate from these words which reflect man wrestling with himself and with God. In the psalms we read words of praise and glory, but also of pain and despair, of trust and hope.

And yet, we will still not unravel all the mysteries of life with our deeds, our studies, our many faith courses and Bible studies. And this needs to be said clearly. The world needs to hear that faith courses, Bible studies and the like are extremely useful in helping us to understand various theological issues, but no one is capable of instructing anyone else in how to love. And it is love that is at the core of our questions about life. The more we study issues of faith, the greater our knowledge becomes, – but do we really know what love is?

I think Paul would also maintain that there is something else more valuable than knowledge.

When he came to the city of Corinth, strangers also had difficulty then in understanding what faith in Jesus Christ is. Their backgrounds and the issues at stake were different from ours, but the biggest obstacle in understanding faith was the same for them as it is for us today. **How can the man who was crucified and died on the cross be the One with and through whom God heals the world and makes it whole again?** In spite of many attempts, there is no rational, logical answer to this question. Our logic reaches its limits here. Our human faculties cannot cross this gap. All our knowledge and all our wisdom cannot help us unravel the mystery of faith in Jesus Christ. Our learning, our studies, all our endeavors fail here. It is the Holy Spirit

that has to present the faith course here. And he does not use our logic and our reasoning to do so. He appeals to our hearts and our senses. We need to attend a faith course in which the Holy Spirit is the teacher.

But when we look at the various faith courses, we don't really find the **Holy Spirit listed as teacher**. Paul reminds us that at our **baptism** we are given the Holy Spirit. He comes into our lives as **teacher and comforter**, just as Christ promised after his resurrection. Baptism is a sacrament, and a sacrament is a visible manifestation of an act of God. – Since the feast of Pentecost in the times of the Apostles, every time we pray for the Coming of the Holy Spirit, we actually pray for him to re-enter our lives and **teach us about the love of the Father**. The Holy Spirit as teacher makes use of words to communicate with us. He is a teacher pointing the way to Jesus Christ through human language, through the words of other people and through the words we find in books, not least of which is the Bible. He uses the tongues of men to proclaim the message of God's love throughout the world. And these human tongues were given the power and authority of God at Pentecost.

But to get back to the stranger who visits our church. At the beginning of the stranger's walk on the path of faith he comes across **simple sentences**, concepts and words. At the beginning he learns only those things that he urgently needs to understand and make himself understood. (Think of what we teach our children in their own language and at their own level.) **Teaching the simplicity of the Bible** is not so difficult for the language teacher in the Spirit's faith course, and the stranger's own curiosity is usually self-motivating. At a **later stage then**, the question of God can be **discussed at length**, even the question of whether he is almighty or not can be **argued** about and discussed with the help of logic and reasoning. But it becomes considerably more difficult when one deals with the darker side of life and one has questions about the tears and the sighs, the wounds and the injustices of life. In this

case, the Holy Spirit, the faith teacher, gives the answers in the faith course and refers to the love of God. **But who can understand that without faith?** It seems to be a vicious circle.

Would Paul be able to explain this to us? In Paul's view, it is only through the Spirit of God that believers can come to understand the gift of Christ. He wrote to the Christians in Corinth that the wisdom of a normal human being is not sufficient to understand this. The unending love of God can only be understood by those who have learned the language of faith from the Holy Spirit. - Let's think about that. That means that you and I should be able to understand. We have been baptized. With baptism we were given a **second language** so to speak, a second form of communication. We became bilingual. Like children who grow up with two languages, so we can communicate a great deal of knowledge about Jesus, the Bible and the Church with the **language of knowledge**, of logic and reasoning. But with **the language of faith**, we can also understand what is utterly incomprehensible to someone who does not have faith, namely the never-ending love of God. With the language of faith that is learned from and through the Holy Spirit, we can understand that God's love is also apparent in the tears and sighs of daily living, when death crosses our path and only lies, and hatred prevail. *For Paul, the Spirit is what gives life to the congregation, Christ crucified can only be proclaimed by the Spirit, and that same proclamation can only be received by the Spirit (2:13-15). When Christ is proclaimed and understood in such a way, the church possesses the mind of Christ (2:16).*

Sometimes bilingual children grow up understanding one language, but not using it to speak themselves. They know that their parents command both languages and then they mainly use the language of their immediate environment. **We are probably such children.** We know that God understands us well and communication with Him works well when need be. Nevertheless, there is much joy and

happiness when the child not only understands the language of the environment but also speaks the less used language. And so the Holy Spirit must experience joy when we ask Him to come, when we confess Him and pray to the Father of Jesus Christ. That is when we no longer speak the language of knowledge and of so-called normal human beings; that is when we sing as baptized children of God with the words of the children of God. Is this not speaking in tongues? - Through the power of the Holy Spirit, which enables us to proclaim the love of God?

So, to pose the question again: if strangers come to our Services, - will they understand whom we mean when we sing: "Come, Holy Spirit"? They cannot understand it, not yet, but they can get a feeling for what it is like when one is able to speak the language of faith. Perhaps they will be curious enough to want to participate in a faith course with the Holy Spirit themselves. Who knows? God knows.

Amen

(With thanks to Katharina Wiefel-Jenner - for ideas and thought-provoking writings.)

And may the peace of God, which is more than we can understand, enter our hearts and minds through the work of the Holy Spirit, and remain with us always. Amen