

## Sermon on 1 Corinthians 2: 1-12

### What Holds at the Centre

**So, has there ever been a more apt text for a period in the world's life than Paul's words from 1 Corinthians 2?**

*We do speak a message of wisdom among the mature, he says, but not the wisdom of the rulers of this age who are coming to nothing. No we declare God's wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, if they had they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.*

Someone suggested to me this week that ministers need not preach on this text today, just let it preach itself.

Sometimes wisdom seems completely lacking from our world.

And the wisdom that is employed, is not really wisdom at all.

It's a pseudo-wisdom, a kind of assumed logic which has been rehearsed many times before with the same results.

Might is right, threat, coerce, act, fight, violence, fear, death.

It was this kind of logic that saw Jesus crucified in the first place Paul says.

Here's someone challenging this status quo, repress him – and sharply.

It's a disaster for the world, of course, for the building of communities, for the strengthening of the bonds of love, yet we keep repeating it expecting a different result.

Human beings were not built to be alone, from our earliest hours to our dying days we need each other, and still we do things which drive us apart.

Inject this into a technological era of instant news, of nuclear weapons, of radical ideologies, climate change, populist politics, and it's a recipe for chaos.

We forget all too quickly that Jesus didn't actually die on a green hill far away, but on a rubbish dump outside the city walls, publicly, in the midst of a world that was tearing itself apart.

**In 1919 the poet WB Yeats eulogised the war that had just destroyed much of Europe, and in doing so also prophetically anticipated the rest of the century to come:**

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.*

The falcon cannot hear the falconer.

The bird is flying without a mark, a guide.

Like a balloon let go without a knot – it flits this way and that as it expels its air.

No form, no pattern, no order.

Spinning out of control.

The world cannot hear its creator; refuses to walk in his way.

The order of God is overturned.

Things fall apart.

The centre that holds life together, that gives it the form and shape for which it was intended, crumbles away.

Anarchy is loosed.

And just about anything goes.

Sam Wells once said that if Jesus returned today, humanity would likely crucify him all over again.

When leaders of democratic, nominally Christian nations defend and trumpet the use of torture, when people enact violence on religious grounds randomly against others simply going about their day, it's hard to disagree with Wells' assessment.

The centre is not holding.

The alternative facts, post truth, fake news world we live in today can't conceal the truth of that fact.

**Paul is writing in a context at least as difficult.**

He's trying to help his Corinthian Christians hold together in the faith he had preached to them, the faith of Jesus Christ.

They had a tendency to go off the rails in various ways.

They would factionalise, or find themselves persuaded by the latest trends in philosophy, or idolise worldly power, embarrassingly familiar problems for a Christian community.

He wants this falcon to hear its falconer.

He wants their centre to hold.

He wants them to come back to the simple self giving, self denying way of Jesus.

So he contrasts the mystery of the wisdom of God with the wisdom of the world.

And he discounts all the things they might find impressive by other standards.

He says, I came with no eloquence, no human wisdom.

I was weak among you and racked with fear and trembling.

I had no great or persuasive words.

I resolved to know nothing among you... expect for Jesus Christ and him crucified.

This alone marks the nature of Paul's ministry.

He draws them back to the deep paradox of the cross again and again.

And says to them in a world where it feels like things are falling apart, not least your little struggling community of Christ, this is how the centre holds together.

This is the call of the falconer.

Here is the mystery of the wisdom of God.

In some veiled, obscure way, the sign of *worldly* wisdom and power, if you look closely enough, with the eyes of faith, is transformed into the sign of the Kingdom of God.

God takes the very nadir of human brokenness, the very height of human arrogance, and makes that the sign of the Kingdom.

This is what Paul calls earlier on 'the foolishness of the cross'.

Christ crucified.

What do you mean you worship a crucified man, the world might ask?

And his death is for you all, the beginning of life?

Amazing.

And when God's Spirit comes to dwell in us through faith, the Spirit which searches even the deep things of God, so we grow in God's cross shaped wisdom and become mature.

**It is, as I said, a deep paradox.**

In Jesus we can know the unknowable God.

We can see the unseeable heart of the divine.

We can hear the Word which was in the beginning and was with God and was God.

And it's these very tensions that should remind us anytime we come close to thinking we somehow control or even fully comprehend the wisdom of God, we are falling away from true wisdom.

Faith is not mastery of subject matter.

We grow in our knowledge of God as we read the Bible, and pray, and serve, and worship, for sure, but we never reach a point where we can see 'we've got it all together now'.

Now we're mature.

We will go on learning and growing and struggling in faith until the day we die.

Yet it is in giving ourselves over to this journey without fear or embarrassment that we find true life.

The way of the cross.

The downward path of love for God and others in which we realise who we have been truly made to be.

**We have a lot to learn from Christians in other parts of the world on this score.**

I was talking with a friend this week who has recently returned from a trip to Lebanon which is home to some of the earliest Christian communities there are.

He visited one church whose foundations were from 250AD and another where it was thought Peter and Paul used to meet often.

He went with a small party and visited both theological colleges and churches, preaching and giving lectures.

He described what it is like to be Christian in a place like Beirut.

There is an armed presence on nearly every block with automatic weapons.

Mosques and churches are set within stone's throw of each other.

Religious politics of such complexity it's hard to imagine.

There is bustle and intensity in the streets and getting around is not altogether easy.

Christians there live under constant pressure, constant real and existential threat the likes of which we can't really imagine here in our small corner of the world.

Things are different on just about every level.

Context matters a great deal.

Regularly in Australian church meetings, for instance, I've heard people say 'the church is not the building, it's the people'.

And while this is true, in Lebanon the buildings are crucially important because, as one Christian told my friend there, they remind the world that we are here.

In a world of pressure and threat, they remind others that we are here, that the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and him crucified, is here.

And we're not going away.

My friend asked what Christians in the West could do for the church in the middle east, and the simple answer came back, pray for us.

Remember us.

Remember that we are here, and you are a part of us, and we a part of you through faith in Jesus.

**In the last 50 years two key mistakes have dogged Christianity in the west: one is that, as Stanley Hauerwas has cautioned against time and time again, we end up worshipping the state not the God of Jesus Christ.**

The second is that we have internalised religious experience into a purely private matter.

Faith is something between me and God and I'll keep it that way without any interference from outside thank you very much.

What I do and believe in my own private world is my business.

It need not be evident in the marketplace, or the voting booth, or the sports club, or the shopping centre, or the world of wider politics.

It has no place in the world other than the recesses of my own experience and I'll control and guard that as far as I like.

It's one of the reasons church going has declined so dramatically in recent times in a country like Australia.

I don't need to go to church to be Christian.

But when Jesus says, 'You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. If salt loses its saltiness what good is it? And a city on a hill cannot be hidden?', it's a direct contrast with this way of thinking.

Faith is by its very nature public.

Like the building itself, the people are to be seen.

Our call as Christians is not to hide our faith away in the envelope of our personal experience, but to live amidst the chaos of the world in a way that bears witness to God's truth; the truth we glimpse in Jesus.

This is true wisdom as Paul sees it, to live together in the way of the cross, worshipping, witnessing, serving.

This is how the falcon hears the falconer, the people of salt and light bearing witness.

This is how the centre holds.

This is how we say to the rulers of this age (of whatever clan, or ideology, or powerbase), remember the authority that sits above all authorities and be humble.

Seek the way of his wisdom.

And none of this is done in our own strength and power, but by the strength and power of the Spirit of God searching and moving within us.

Our faith, that we rightly nurture and reflect on, is not actually ours.

Rather it is a gift from God which is intended to make us into the people God intended and help the world live into the way for which it was intended.

### **A short story to close.**

While we were away we went to church in Mt Gambier and following the service a man who had obviously been through the wringer of life came up to speak to me.

For the 10 or so minutes we conversed I might have said 2 or 3 sentences.

He was literally bursting at the seams to tell me about his new venture.

He had started a little business.

He would acquire pallets (you know those wooden ones on which produce or boxes etc would be placed), pallets which companies didn't want any more which were all broken and bashed, dismantle them and build them into furniture.

Before I could stop him he had his iPhone out to show me.

And he had made lots of things: bookshelves, outdoor settings, wall hangings, all from these pallets.

He was making a little money out of it.

When the conversation (or monologue) closed, he moved on to speak to the next person.

That was it. He was so pleased to be sharing his good news he simply blurted it out to the nearest warm body.

And while he may not have articulated this way, for him the transformation of those pallets into something beautiful, and functional, and useable, was a sign of his own transformation in faith.

He said as much in his own words.

In telling me all about it he was living publicly the faith of Christ crucified.

And as I reflected on this little interaction I thought there right in front of me again was the wisdom of God set into a life.

Perhaps his pallets wouldn't change the world.

Yet they were, he was, a little light, a little sign of what holds at the centre of things.

In his own way he had faith that the world could be different.

That chaos needn't reign and things can be put back together.

That there is hope for us all, and we pray, for the peoples of our planet.

He believed it, and by our life and faith, so should we.

There is always hope.

For as Francis Spufford said, 'Far more can be mended than you know.'

Amen.