

Not Clever Enough

A sermon on 1 Corinthians 2:1-16 & Matthew 5:13-20 by Nathan Nettleton, 5 February 2017

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Message

The world finds the message of Jesus almost incomprehensible because it seems too simplistic and unrealistic to be taken seriously.

Sermon

Mark Twain once said that what bothered him most about the Christian message was not the things he couldn't understand, but the things he could. What he didn't say but was probably implying was that we often avoid the uncomfortably challenging things that we understand perfectly well by spending our time arguing about the things that are much more difficult to understand.

We heard part of Jesus's sermon on the mount tonight, and surely one of the reasons that the sermon on the mount is so often relegated to the sidelines of Christian teaching is that most of it is perfectly clear but seriously challenging. "Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. Turn the other cheek." No one needs a philosophy degree to understand such things, and at the same time, having one won't make them any easier to live out. Perhaps that's why it is so tempting to brush them aside as unrealistic utopian dreams of a future age, and look for something more impressively complicated.

When the Apostle Paul addressed himself to the people of ancient Corinth, he was speaking to one of the most intellectually sophisticated cities of the Greco-Roman world. It was a bit like how today's English speaking world thinks of Oxford and Cambridge or Princeton and Harvard. The epicentre of higher education, culture and philosophy.

I don't know if you've ever had the experience of having to make a speech to a group of cultured and educated people, and realising just a few minutes in that they all know far more about everything than you do and that they have realised that listening to you is a waste of their time. You start to see the raised eyebrows and the smirks as they silently confirm this with one another, and then the bored wandering of attention as they wait for your pathetic excuse of a speech to be over.

That seems to be how Paul thinks he was viewed in Corinth, and in the passage we heard tonight, he addresses that, and defends his message. It seems that he did it deliberately.

I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus the messiah, and him crucified.

Talking about Jesus as being in any way important was already a stretch for the sophisticated Corinthians. It was a bit like if I was to tell you that last month there was a prisoner you had never heard of who was executed by government soldiers in some trouble spot in Syria that you had never heard of, and then I claimed that that executed prisoner was actually the revelation of God, the meaning of life, and the key to unlocking the hidden mysteries of the

universe. Think about how that would sound to you, and you might have some idea of what Paul sounded like to the Corinthians when he spoke of Jesus.

Talking about Jesus's crucifixion made it a lot worse, but the impact is a bit lost on us. Unlike us, the people of polite Greco-Roman society would have witnessed crucifixions, but they certainly didn't like to talk about them. When Paul says "that's what I decided to talk about among you," it is a bit like you or me attending a very posh dinner for some very important dignitaries, and deciding during dinner to describe in a loud voice and with stomach-churning detail watching a bunch of rats feasting on maggot infested road-kill. In polite Greco-Roman society, crucifixion was familiar, but it was too disgusting to talk about.

But Paul decides to address them "knowing nothing among you except Jesus the messiah, and him crucified."

It is, apart from anything else, an extraordinarily courageous decision on Paul's part. As he says, he is perfectly capable of speaking profoundly about the gospel in terms of deep wisdom, but he has chosen to speak plainly and simply to the point of crudeness. I doubt whether I would have been brave enough to so willingly expose myself to their ridicule and contempt. But Paul is not willing to allow the gospel to be presented as just one more complex and intriguing philosophy for detached academic discussion among the sophisticates. It is too important for that.

You will remember that last week we heard him say, from just a few verses before this one, that God's foolishness is wiser than the wisdom of the world. So Paul is not saying that there is no wisdom here in this apparent crude simplicity. It is, he says, "God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory." This wisdom of God, secret and hidden, says Paul, is not understood by any of the rulers of this age, for if they had understood it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

Now I want you to note that when Paul says that it is secret and hidden, he does not say that God actively and intentionally hid it. Something can remain secret and hidden because we become blind to it, and that doesn't mean that God is at fault for hiding it from us. Elsewhere too, Paul speaks of "the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things." (Ephesians 3:9) That's hidden in God, not hidden by God. And Matthew's gospel says that Jesus's teaching proclaimed "what has been hidden from the foundation of the world." (Matthew 13:35)

So what Paul seems to be saying is that the most important mysteries of the universe were hidden from us by our own expectation that they should be too complex and sophisticated and profound for ordinary people to easily grasp. Looking in all the wrong places, we totally missed the point.

We went looking for complex atonement theories that explained in great detail how the death of the perfect sacrifice was somehow the only way that God's justice could be satisfied and God's mercy obtained and a sinful and alienated human race made righteous and accepted into the presence of a perfectly holy God. We went looking for bizarre theories like the verbal plenary inspiration of the scriptures, and convoluted distinctions between justification and sanctification, and endless debates about predestination and premillennial eschatology. But in the end, although Paul is not averse to dipping his toes into such depths on occasion, what he

is saying here is that if we try to start there we will miss the point for sure. The fundamental mysteries of the universe are nowhere near so complicated.

The fundamental mysteries of the universe are simply given to us, Paul says, as gifts. God has given us Jesus, as a gift. God has given us the Holy Spirit, as a gift. God has given us love and mercy and hope, as gifts. And all the gifts reveal the same thing, the great mystery that has been hidden by our own blindness since the foundation of the world, the great mystery that God loves us, deeply and passionately and overwhelmingly; the great mystery that God really really likes you; that God looks at you and bursts into love-song crying, “Yes! How wonderful you are. Come dance with me, you who are beloved from the foundation of the earth.” God looks at you and thinks, “I love you so much I’d willingly die for you.”

Oh no, we say. It can’t be that simple. Surely we need a complex religious system full of sacred rituals and profound liturgies; surely we need to know how many angels can fit on a pin-head and how many wings the seraphim have; surely we need a religious legal code to meticulously define the line between holiness and sinfulness and police it fiercely. Has not the Torah given us 613 commandments and not one jot or tittle shall disappear from the law until all is accomplished? Isn’t that what Jesus said?

Yes, says Jesus, but all is accomplished, and all that is important in those 613 commandments, I can sum up in just two: love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind, and love your neighbour as attentively as you love yourself. That’s all. If you accept the gift and know yourself deeply and truly beloved that’s all you need. What? Who is your neighbour? Well, love your enemies. That ought to cover it. Look, if it still not clear, just follow me. Do as I do. Love everyone else the way I have loved you. That’s all there is to it. Just love. They will know that you are my followers by your love. Not by your grasp of atonement theories. By your love.

The deepest mysteries of the universe come down to one simple word that even a child can understand. Love.

Or rather than “even a child can understand”, I might say perhaps only a child can understand. The rest of us seem to be pretty good at missing it. So good that when we saw perfect love, we crucified it. And when we realised what we had done, we went right back to trying to turn it back into something impressively complicated. We tried to fit the crucifixion itself into complicated theories of atonement and justification and divine justice, and it is possible to do that, but it nearly always misses the point, which is love, love, love.

No wonder the world doesn’t recognise it and the rulers of the world have not understood it. The rulers of the world are too busy policing their borders and standing up to one another in heated phone conversations about which country can strategically avoid having to provide a home for 1200 asylum seekers. They are too busy seeking to define who are our people and who are not, who has a claim on our hospitality and who does not. They are back to splitting hairs over the “who is my neighbour?” question, and clearly none of them think the 1200 are.

The revelation of the cross has been missed again; the revelation that all our sophisticated cleverness, and all the combined expertise of our political religious and legal systems, still just ends up crucifying innocent people because we’ve missed the only point that really matters, love. Love for the crucified one. Love for the crucified exiled 1200. Love for the persecutors

and politicians too. Love for you and me, for us and them, and for 1200 faces we have never seen and names we have never heard. Not political bargains to appease electorates. Love. Always love.

But this is God's wisdom, secret and hidden, 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 nor cast out 1200 of his dearly beloved.

But, as it is written,

 “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
 nor the human heart conceived,
 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, and there in the depths of God, all is love. Love, freely given as a gift, fully revealed in the crucified Jesus. Love that endures everything and stops at nothing. Love, so simple that many scorn it and turn away. Love. The beginning and the end. Love.