

ORDINARY YET PERPLEXING

Today's Text: 1 Cor. 1: 18- 31

Extracts:

We preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God...For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence. But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God- and righteousness and sanctification and redemption [1 Cor. 1: 23-30]

Norway is regarded as one of the most secular nations in an increasingly godless Europe, with only about one percent of its 5 million residents being regular church goers.¹In 2012, its Parliament passed a law to end the status of the Lutheran Church as the official state religion. But to everyone's surprise, a new Bible translation released by the Norwegian Bible Society in October 2011 has suddenly become the No. 1 best seller. Also, a new six-hour play, the "Bibelen," (Norwegian for The Bible) drew 16,000 people in a three-month run that recently ended in one of Oslo's most prominent theatres.

Some analysts and observers have tried to explain away the causes of the resurgence, attributing it to the wave of new immigrants, among other factors. However, a good proportion of such new residents are not even Christians. Therefore, we should recognise the development as ordinary and yet perplexing. God works in ways that do not make sense to human wisdom or logic. The richest people among us may not be the hardest working; nor are the best pastors the most educated. The matter is in God's hands.

In this week's Bible verses, Paul has drawn our attention to this phenomenon concerning our faith in Christ, namely, that God uses the foolish and base things of this world to confound the wise. The more you look at ordinary things around you, the more they look perplexing to explain or to understand. Your faith in Christ is one such matter. Let us find out more about it in this week's study.

¹ Based on: Saleha Mohsin, "Bible's strong comeback surprises secular Norway," *Associated Press*, 6 June 2013; <http://omg.yahoo.com/news/bibles-strong-comeback-surprises-secular-norway-072531623.html>

1. Background: Is your faith in Christ a myth or a mystery?

Recall the experience of Paul and Silas when they were locked up in a Philippian prison after they had been severely beaten. At midnight, as they started to sing and praise God, there was a great earthquake, such that the very foundations of the prison were shaken, all the doors were opened and the chains binding the prisoners were loosed. Fearing that his job was on the line, the keeper of the prison drew his sword to kill himself. Paul restrained him, assuring him that all the prisoners were still there. On confirming that fact (after they had brought him a light), he fell down at Paul and Silas' feet trembling and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They replied, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household." That night, the prison keeper and all his family members were baptized [Acts 16: 25-34].

I can imagine that officer narrating his experience to his colleagues the following morning. Some would certainly share his joy and new fervour. The majority, on the other hand, would most probably laugh at his "foolishness" for allowing himself to be "hypnotized" by two Jewish prisoners.

Many of us who have come to Christ may find themselves in a similar situation. ***You will find yourself at war with human wisdom that keeps reminding you that to walk by faith in Christ is foolishness.*** You may have heard it said that religion is an opium used by the powerful to keep the weak and ignorant under their control. Such harsh words are used to deride people who dare to place their faith on an "unknowable" God. ***The believers in the church at Corinth faced a similar challenge from both the Jews and the Gentiles. That was why Paul wrote them to address the issue.*** Here are the key points in Paul's treatise:

a) *The cross represents redemption not shame*

Paul wrote, "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" [1 Cor. 1: 18]. The vicarious sacrifice of Christ is well portrayed in Isaiah's prophecy. God laid upon Him the iniquity of us all. He was led as a lamb to the slaughter. After His death, they made His grave with the wicked and the rich [Is. 53: 1-9]. For humbling Himself to come in human form and to die in our place, even the death on the cross, His Father has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name [Phil. 2: 5-11]. By His atoning death on the cross, we have received access to salvation in His Father's house in heaven.

However, that is not what the cross represents in the Law of Moses or in Roman law. For the Jews, "if a man has committed a sin deserving of death, and he is put to death, and you shall hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain overnight on the tree, but you shall surely bury him that

day, so that you do not defile the land which the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance; for ***he who is hanged is accursed of God***” [Deut. 21: 22-23]. Therefore, Christ’s death on the cross was to the Jews a shameful form of death, reserved for sinners.

For the Romans, crucifixion was not for citizens but foreigners. It was considered beneath the dignity of Roman citizens. That was why, according to church history, Paul, a Roman citizen, was beheaded while Peter, a Jew, was crucified (upside down at his request). ***Therefore, to preach the cross to Jews and Gentiles as representing salvation was perceived as foolish.*** Paul summed it up this way [1 Cor. 1: 23-24]:

But we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

Indeed, Christ has redeemed true believers from the curse of the law, having become a curse for them, that the blessings of Abraham might come upon us the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith [Gal. 3: 13]

b) *Human definitions do not apply to God’s ways*

Paul also reminded his audience that the foolishness of God is wiser than men and the weakness of God is stronger than men [1 Cor. 1:25]. In other words, ***the way God sees things is completely different from how we do.*** God’s thoughts are not our thoughts, nor His ways ours “for as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are [His] ways higher than [our] ways, and [His] thoughts than [our] thoughts” [Is. 55: 8-9].

Paul illustrated that point as follows [1 Cor. 1: 27-28]:

- God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise

By human standards, what does not look logical or make commonsense is foolish. For example, you should not go to war against a strong enemy unless you are better armed. Yet, to take the fortified city of Jericho, God commanded Joshua and his troops to walk around its walls everyday for six days and seven times on the seventh day. Thereafter, they should shout. When they did so, the walls of the city fell down flat and the troops “went up into the city, everyman straight before him, and they took the city” [Josh.6: 1-20]. In the eyes of human war strategists, that would be seen as a foolish plan that could have exposed Joshua’s troops to a

disastrous defeat. Yet Joshua won where earlier warriors against Jericho had failed.

- God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things that are mighty

We are usually told to meet fire with fire, strength with greater strength. Yet, when Jehoshaphat went to war against the mighty armies of Ammon, Moab and Mount Seir, he put praise singers in front of his troops in obedience to God's word that the battle was His. By the time they reached the war front, the enemies had killed one another! Jehoshaphat spent three days "gathering the spoil because there was so much" [2 Chron. 20; 1-25].

- God has chosen the base and despised things and things that are not to bring to nothing the things that are

Human beings would pay more attention to talents and skills development, education and experience, to place people in key positions. But God does not look at physical features but the heart when He chooses talents or teams [1 Sam. 16: 7]. For example, the disciples of Jesus were largely poorly educated fishermen from around the Sea of Galilee and despised tax collectors like Matthew, and a thief like Judas Iscariot; people that the Pharisees looked down on. Among the women were those "who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities" For example, Mary Magdalene was delivered of seven demons and Joanna was the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward [Lk 8: 2-3] Yet, their powerful gospel of Christ's resurrection defeated the mighty Roman Empire that later adopted Christianity as a state religion.

In sum, Paul reminded believers at Corinth that no flesh should glory in God's presence for, as it is written, "He who glories, let him glory in the LORD." They should glory in Christ Jesus "who became for us wisdom from God- and righteousness and sanctification and redemption" [1 Cor. 1: 29-31]. Therefore, *you do not have to understand every aspect of your faith. All God is asking you to do is just believe!* We shall return to this conclusion later.

2. The perplexing aspects of your faith in Christ

Like every other believer, you may be battling with your faith right now. Certain problems and circumstances confront you and you are under pressure from family and peers to forget your faith and listen to "wise counsel" from experts and gurus. Before you get carried away by such temptations, it may be reassuring for you to pay attention to the following perplexing aspects of your faith in Christ Jesus:

a) *There is so much you do not understand nor can explain!*

Human logic or advanced education may never help you to understand or explain some aspects of your faith. For example, how many Christians do you know that understand the doctrine of the Trinity or how Jesus is the only way to God? How many people do you know who can conceptualise or even imagine what God looks like? How did He come into existence? Why does He allow evil people to thrive for so long? Why does He allow good people to suffer? No human being can give you adequate answers.

Recall Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews that came to Him by night. When Jesus told him about being born again as a visa to enter the kingdom of God, Nicodemus asked Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" [Jn 3: 1-3]. The human logical mind blinded his ability to take in the concept of being born again. On another occasion, when Jesus was giving His disciples instructions regarding offending, forgiving and faith, He taught them that if their brother sinned against them seven times in a day and returned seven times in a day with repentance, seeking forgiveness, they should forgive him. Astonished, the apostles said to Him, "Increase our faith." He replied that it is not the size of your faith that matters but how you use it [Lk 17: 1-6].

So, do not fret over how little you know about your faith. Just believe in Jesus and His atoning death on the cross for you. That is all that matters for, in the words of Paul, "I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified ... that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God" [1 Cor. 2: 2-5].

b) *Yet you are expected to live by faith, not by sight!*

No matter how much or how little you know, you are expected to live by faith and not by sight [2 Cor. 5: 7] if you want to please God [Heb. 11: 6]. ***To walk by faith is to let go and let God; to do ONLY and ALL that God commands you to do. It means TOTAL surrender to God's will.*** Unfortunately, some believers pick and choose- obeying only what agrees with their hearts' desires and rejecting what looks hard or unattractive.

For example, God commanded King Saul (through a prophetic word from Samuel) to kill all the Amalekites and destroy all they owned. He spared Agag their king and the best of their flock. When Samuel confronted him later, he said, "Blessed are you of the LORD! I have performed the commandment of the LORD." When the prophet reminded him that he had actually disobeyed God, the king replied, "I feared the people and obeyed their voice." For that, he lost his throne [1 Sam. 15: 1-24]. Do you

know how many people have lost their blessings because of fear of man or the desire to be politically correct? Compare Saul's faith with that of the man born blind that obeyed the word of Jesus to go wash in the pool of Siloam and received back his sight. When the Jewish leaders threatened to throw him out of the temple for giving God's glory to a "sinner" like Jesus, the man said, "Whether He is a sinner or not I do not know. One thing I know; that though I was blind, now I see" [Jn 9: 1-25].

Here is the heart of the matter: by your fruits of faith, people will know that you are a true follower of Christ. It has nothing to do with the loud noise of your church rank or religious qualifications from Bible college. To the world, you may look cheap and ordinary. Do not worry about that because before God, you are wise because you have invested in eternity in heaven. That is perplexing! That is Paul's message.

3. Conclusion: Get wise- stay with Jesus!

As more and more listeners heard Jesus expound His doctrine on the kingdom of God, many of His disciples said, "This is a hard saying; who can understand it?" From that time on, many of them left and walked with Him no more. Then Jesus turned to the twelve apostles and asked them, "Do you also want to go away?" Simon Peter replied, "***Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Also we have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God***" [Jn 6: 60-69].

To the world, Peter's faith was foolish. But before Jesus and His Father, Peter made a wise choice. When the new heaven and the new earth are created and the New Jerusalem, the holy city, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband, is descended, its wall would have twelve foundations, and "on them [would be written] the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb" [Rev. 21: 1-14]. Peter's name would be on one of those foundations.

So, like Peter, get wise. Stay with Jesus. Your decision may look foolish to your family and friends. But when the results begin to show, you can only but make them look perplexed!

Stay with Jesus. It is a very wise decision to do so.