

## ***The scandal of the cross***

What are your thoughts, feelings, images, ideas when you think of 'the cross'? How would you explain it to someone who asked, "What's that all about?!"

Why not pause for a moment and think about that?

If the person before you seemed to be a serious enquirer, then what? Suppose they said, "Why do you Christians concentrate on the torture and death of Jesus? Why is it so important to you that you put huge crosses all over the place?"

How would you answer that?

I think I'd first want to say that the death of Jesus wasn't the end, but that God brought him back to life.

The Paul of 2+ years ago would probably then 'tell them the gospel', I'd tell them how Jesus' death was the punishment that I deserve...etc...etc.

Now I'm not so sure.

I have an idea! Let's ask the Paul of almost 2000 years ago what he would say...

1 Corinthians 1:10. I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. 11 My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. 12 What I mean is this: One of you says, "**I follow Paul**"; another, "**I follow Apollos**"; another, "**I follow Cephas**"; still another, "**I follow Christ.**" 13 Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptised into the name of Paul?

**[Can you imagine how Paul would react to the total and utter scandal of the way Christians have fought and killed and tortured one another in the name of 'THE TRUTH'?! And even if we don't kill each other physically these days, we do ridicule each other's views.]**

14. I am thankful that I did not baptise any of you except Crispus and Gaius, 15 so no-one can say that you were baptised into my name. (16 Yes, I also baptised the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't remember if I baptised anyone else.)

17. For Christ did not send me to baptise, but to **preach the gospel** – not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. 18 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.**

**[I think we've robbed the cross of its power, as I'll explain in a minute. (And more next time.)]**

19 For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate." 20 Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. 22 Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, 23 but **we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,** 24 but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, **Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.** 25 For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength. 26 Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. 27 But **God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. 28 He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are, 29 so that no-one may boast before him.** 30 It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. 31 Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."

1 Corinthians 2:1. When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. 2 For **I resolved to know nothing** while I was with you **except Jesus Christ and him crucified.** 3 I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. 4 My message and my preaching were **not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power,** 5 so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.

If I'm a good Protestant, I insist on a cross, not a crucifix! Don't depict Jesus on the cross – that's idolatry – use an empty cross, because Jesus rose from the dead.

If I'm a good Evangelical, I'll bring to mind the gospel presentation that I was taught, so that I can explain how the cross takes away our sin and allows us free access into heaven.

Yes, but what would Paul do? I think he would 'preach the gospel'. In other words, he would tell them the story – tell them what actually happened, and let the power of the gospel, the power of the narrative speak into the heart of the person he's talking to.

Part of the problem is that we've sanitised the cross, we've robbed the cross of its utter scandal: Christ crucified! The Messiah, the anointed of God, the chosen one, the mighty conqueror, who was coming to reign in power and great glory was CRUCIFIED. Can you begin to see how that's totally **shocking**?!

And no, I'm not talking about the physical suffering of Jesus, as terrible as that was. It's the traditional evangelist who uses that as the **shock**, giving us graphic detail of what scourging entailed, and that terrible crown of thorns – and this was caused by your sin and mine! So we need to repent and believe to have our sins forgiven!

What persuasive words those are! Yes, exactly! They are 'persuasive words', just like Paul says in 1 Cor 2:4 **NOT** to use!

We have reduced Jesus' work on the cross to a mechanism by which **my** sins can be forgiven so that **I** can get into heaven. We've made it 'nice'; it's NOT, it's totally shocking!

Physical pain, yes, but it's the total shame of the cross that we need to understand afresh. To the New Testament mind, it was just awful, the idea of someone stripped naked and hung up on a pole for everyone to laugh and jeer at.

I'm sorry for saying this, but it's a bit like (please forgive me, Ma'am) Her Royal Highness Queen Elizabeth II being led through the streets of London stark naked!

Does that help you to feel just how totally jarring 'Jesus Christ and him crucified' would have felt to the first people who heard it?

There's a lot more to be said on this topic, but that's enough for now.

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