

Jesus Christ the Crucified

1 Corinthians 2:1-5

John Breon

As the apostle Paul writes to the Christians in Corinth, he reminds them of how the preaching of the cross was his focus. The Corinthians had written to Paul asking some questions about problems in their church. Paul had also heard about divisions in the Corinthian church. Groups in the church were going off on tangents and claiming to be followers of various Christian leaders. They were inflating the importance of issues out at the edge. And Paul calls them back to the center: Christ.

Some of the Corinthians were excited about wisdom and loved to hear sophisticated teachers expound wise ideas with lofty rhetoric. Paul says, "That's not how I preach the gospel." He refutes this overemphasis on the world's wisdom by contrasting it with the gospel. The message of the cross is not some new wisdom teaching. It is God's wisdom and power, which seem to be foolishness by the world's standards.

To illustrate how foolish and weak God's wisdom and power seem by worldly standards, Paul says, "Look at you." God chose you and called people like you to be the church (1:26-31). So often, God uses the least likely people to get his work done.

Then Paul says, "Look at me." God chose someone like me to preach the gospel. He reminds the Corinthians of how he first came to them: I wasn't eloquent. I didn't have the training or the sophisticated wisdom of these grand orators who persuade you by their arguments. I was weak and scared.

What are we afraid of? What fear keeps us from sharing the gospel or serving in the name of Jesus? The apostle Paul was scared and probably intimidated as he went to Corinth. But he went and he spoke in spite of his fear. He knew it wasn't all up to him. He knew that God could work through his weaknesses. He knew that the power of God's Spirit was at work in him. He trusted the power of the gospel message and the power of the Holy Spirit. We can trust God to work through our weaknesses too.

Paul couldn't rely on eloquence or worldly wisdom. So he wouldn't preach in the style or with the content of Greek speech-making. His message was simple and was opposed to all that so-called wisdom. Paul's message was the message of the cross.

The message of the cross is *Jesus Christ and him crucified*. The heart of the gospel is not wise ideas or sophisticated theories. The heart of the gospel is a person. The message of the cross confronts us with the One who died on a cross—Jesus Christ the crucified.

Who is this Person on the cross whom Paul proclaimed? Who is Jesus Christ? His name and his title declare him to be the Savior and God's anointed—the Messiah, God's uniquely chosen one. He reveals God, delivers God's people and rules over them.

Elsewhere, Paul describes Jesus as "...the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created...." And "...God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him.... For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form..." (Colossians 1: 15, 16, 20; 2:9). Paul also says that though Christ Jesus was in very nature God, he made himself nothing (emptied himself) and took on the very nature of a servant. He humbled himself and became obedient, even to death on a cross (Philippians 2:5-8).

Drawing on these and other Scriptures, early church teachers formed the doctrine of the Incarnation. They were saying that in the Person of Jesus Christ is the unique union of God's nature and human nature. They affirmed that Jesus is "true and very God and true and very human."

In Jesus, God has taken on human nature. God became one of us and one with us. God has entered fully into human life. From conception to dying God has experienced our life and shown us how to live.

Sometimes we hear talk about Jesus that makes him seem unreal. Ever since the time of the NT's writing, various people have denied either his full humanity or his full divine nature. But God the Son came all the way to become fully human. He is for real.

I once heard UM pastor Joe Harding tell about being on a flight from Switzerland to the US. The man sitting next to him spoke English, so they struck up a conversation. Joe told the man that he was a pastor. Then he

asked the man what he did. He said he was an actor. Joe asked what he had been in. The man started naming some Broadway plays and movies. Then he said he was in a movie years ago that perhaps Joe had seen. He said, "I played the part of Marcellus in *The Robe*." Joe asked, "Who are you?" The man said, "My name is Richard Burton." If you're under 45, you might need to ask someone older who Richard Burton was.

Joe was thinking, "What an opportunity. Lord, don't let me blow this one." Then he said to Burton, "I was deeply moved by the crucifixion scene in *The Robe*. It must have been very inspiring to film it."

Burton shuddered and said, "No. It was the weirdest thing I've ever seen. We filmed it in a studio. Jerusalem was merely painted on a backdrop. Calvary was just a mock-up hill. The figure on the cross was plaster with plastic tubing running to the hands and feet and side. A man under the hill pumped red liquid up through the tubes to make it appear the figure was bleeding. We could see the man with the pump while we were filming the scene. It was so bizarre that one of the actors had a mental breakdown and had to be replaced."

Joe thought for a while. They were about to land when he said, "What you told me has affected me profoundly. If Jesus is just a plaster figure then insanity is a merciful escape. But I want you to know—he is for real."

He is real. The Person on the cross is God in human flesh. His suffering and death were very real. Paul proclaimed Jesus Christ *crucified*. God in the flesh suffered the humiliation of a criminal's execution and endured all the suffocating pain of dying nailed to a cross.

Why? Although Paul doesn't mention it in this passage, *love* is implied in the preaching of the cross. He brings it out more clearly in other passages. "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). In Galatians 2:20 Paul writes of "...the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." And, in Ephesians 5:2, he says, "walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us...."

We see not only the Person on the cross, we see the *passion* of the cross. The term "Passion" is a traditional way of speaking about the suffering and death of Jesus. That word meant suffering. For us "passion"

has come to mean intense feelings. Those two definitions help us understand something of the love displayed at the cross.

Jesus' *compassion* is his suffering *with* us. When he took on human nature, Jesus took on the pains that go with it. Jesus' *passion* is his suffering *for* us. He suffered and died for us, in our place, because of our sin. Underlying and motivating all of this is his *passionate*, intense, love for people and hatred of sin.

On the cross God shows his great love for us. But on the cross God also judges sin. God shows how seriously he takes sin by the price he's willing to pay to deal with it.

So at the cross, God shows himself to be both just and the justifier of those who have faith in Jesus. At the cross the holy God's righteous demands are met as the heavenly Father's loving heart is poured out.

It's hard to believe that our sin is that serious and that we need something as drastic as the cross for our forgiveness. It's hard to believe that God really loves us like that—that Jesus would endure all he suffered and die for us.

But God really does love us. The cross did not change God's mind about us, it expressed how God has always loved us and will love us forever.

Julian of Norwich was an English mystic in the 14th Century. She lived in solitude next to the church of St. Julian. When she was thirty years old she became very ill. During this time she received revelations from God "by bodily visions, by words formed in her understanding, and by spiritual vision."

She desired to have recollection of Christ's Passion so that she might see what He suffered for her...

She prayed that His pains might be her pains so that she might be led into a deeper longing for God. Praying for understanding and compassion, she suddenly saw the red blood trickling down from under the crown, flowing freely and copiously, a living stream, as if it were at the time the crown of thorns was thrust down upon His head. And after a time she saw Him as He died. And His face changed as

death took hold of His body. As her eyes were fixed upon Christ on the cross, the expression on His face changed from sorrow and pain to joy. The change in His countenance suddenly filled her with joy and gladness also.

And the Lord put a question to her. "Are you well satisfied that I have suffered for you?"

"Yes, good Lord, all my thanks to you, good Lord, blessed may you be!" was her answer.

And then *He* said to her, "If you are satisfied, I am satisfied. It is a joy and a bliss and an endless delight to me that ever I suffered my passion for you. And if I could suffer more, I would." (Bob Benson, *In Quest of the Shared Life* 60-61)

God loves you like that. What are you going to do with it?

Paul goes on to say that the preaching of Jesus the crucified who loves us has *power*. Again, Paul works with the contrast of humanity's seeming wisdom and power and God's seeming foolishness and weakness. In apparent weakness God's power is revealed. God's power for salvation and redemption is made known in the weakness of a Man hanging on a cross.

Christ himself is the power and wisdom of God. Paul preached Christ. And his message was powerful, though his appearance and delivery were not. He preached with weakness, fear and trembling. His listeners were not convinced by Paul's wise and persuasive words, but by the demonstration of the Spirit's power. I wonder what that is—signs and wonders accompanying Paul's preaching? An awareness of Christ's presence as he preached? The changed lives of the people who heard him? A spiritual conviction that what he said was true? People coming to faith in response to his message?

Whatever that demonstration of the Spirit's power was, we need God to do it for us. It's too easy to think that because we have talked about something that we've done it. Or because we've listened to a sermon or read a book that we've done all we need to do. But we need to do God's

will, not just talk about it. We need to experience the power of God, not just think about it.

And, the preaching of Christ crucified has power because the Holy Spirit makes Jesus' sacrifice effective and the Spirit makes the proclamation of that sacrifice effective. The message of the cross confronts us with the One who died for us. And there is power in that to change our lives.

Bishop Sheen was a great church leader in the middle part of the 20th century. He told a story about a young man who was a trouble maker and was into all kinds of trouble. Finally, his mother convinced him to go to Confession. But as he spoke, the priest said, "Get out of here! You're not repentant." And he said, "I know. I'm not sorry for my sins. What can I do?" The priest took him into the sanctuary and marched him right up to the crucifix. He dared him to come in there each day, look at Christ on the cross, shake his fist and say, "Jesus Christ, you died for me and I don't care!"

He did it that first day. The second day he came in, shook his fist at the crucifix and said, "Jesus Christ, you died for me and I ... I don't care." The third day he came in, looked at the cross and fell to his knees saying, "Jesus Christ, you died for me and I do care." And he was gloriously converted. (Bob Stamps told this story in ORU Chapel, Spring 1981)

We are challenged, dared, to look in the face of God's love on the cross and not be converted. How can we face God's love for us displayed in the cross and not respond?

Thorns on His head, spear in His side
yet it was a heartache that made Him cry
He gave His life so you would understand
Is there any way you could say no to this Man?

If Christ Himself were standing here
face full of glory and eyes full of tears
and He held out His arms and His nail-pierced hands
is there any way you could say no to this Man?

How could you look in His tear-stained eyes
knowing it's you He's thinking of?
Could you tell Him you're not ready to give Him your life?
Could you say you don't think you need His love?

Jesus is here with His arms opened wide
You could see Him with your heart
if you'd stop looking with your eyes
He's left it up to you, He's done all He can
Is there any way you could say no to this Man?
(Mickey Cates; recorded by Julie Miller; Billy Sprague)

When Rembrandt painted the crucifixion scene, he included his own face among the crowd of onlookers. When Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of the Christ* came out, I read that one of the hands shown nailing Jesus to the cross is Gibson's. Paint yourself into Calvary—with all your sin, all your sorrow, all your struggles. Stay at the foot of the cross until you know it was for you, until God's love given there draws your response of love to God. Christ who died for you and rose again can enable you to begin again and to live a new life in him.