

WISDOM AND FOOLISHNESS, FAITH AND SPIRIT*Sermon for the 5th Sunday after Epiphany, 2020***1 Corinthians 2:1-16**

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is our Second Lesson from before, 1 Corinthians 2:1-16: ¹ **When I came to you, fellow-Christians, to proclaim the testimony of God to you, I did not come as a person who was superior in speech or wisdom.** ² **For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.** ³ **I came to you in weakness, in fear and with much trembling.** ⁴ **I did not speak and preach with persuasive words of wisdom but with the demonstration of the Spirit and power,** ⁵ **that your faith might not rest on human wisdom but on the power of God.**

⁶ **However, we speak wisdom to those who are mature but not the wisdom of this age, or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing.** ⁷ **No, we tell about the wisdom of God in a mystery, a wisdom that has been hidden but that God ordained before the ages for our glory.** ⁸ **None of those who rule this world has known it. For, if they had known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.** ⁹ **Rather, as Scripture has said, “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has comprehended what God has prepared for those who love Him.”** ¹⁰ **Nevertheless, God has revealed it to us through His Spirit. The Spirit searches out all things, even the deep things of God.** ¹¹ **For what human being knows the things that belong to the human being except the human being’s spirit in him? In the same way, no one knows the things that belong to God except the Spirit of God.** ¹² **We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who comes from God, that we may know the things that God has freely given to us.** ¹³ **We speak about these things in words not taught by human wisdom but in Words taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who have the Spirit.** ¹⁴ **However, an unspiritual person does not receive the things of the Spirit of God. For they are foolishness to him, and he cannot know them because they are discerned spiritually.** ¹⁵ **The spiritual person judges all things but he himself is not judged by anyone.** ¹⁶ **For “who has known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct Him?” However, we have the mind of Christ.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

It’s really all so simple. We are sinful. We all do and say things that are wrong. We all have thoughts bouncing around in our heads that are no good at all. We all bear grudges and do not always wish good things for our neighbour. We know what we think and do and say are wrong at times, but that does not stop us from going ahead and doing it. It’s like the apostle Paul says, *“I do not do what I want to do, but I do what I hate”* (Romans 7:15). There really is something wrong about us.

Praise God then that He loves us so much that He has sent His only Son to save us!¹ Jesus Christ, the Son of God, became man. He was born of Mary, with flesh and blood. He has saved us because He died on a cross in our place. God judged His Son, instead of us, for our sin. Now that the price has been paid, God does not hold our sin against us but forgives us. We don’t earn this forgiveness. He gives it to us. He speaks it to us in His Word. He gives it to us in Holy Baptism, by means of water and the Word. He delivers it to us in the Lord’s Supper, where He gives His body and blood - in, with and under bread and wine. Because Jesus died that death for us, we have eternal life.

It’s really that simple. God’s plan of salvation for mankind is that simple. But not only is it simple, it is also powerful. It is the Gospel, the power of salvation to all those who believe.²

So it was that when Paul preached the Gospel to the Corinthians, he kept it simple. He didn’t have to: if you read through Romans or Ephesians, you know that Paul can construct a thorough argument and address complex situations - he wasn’t a simpleton. However, in his preaching to the Corinthians, he simply says, **“For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified,”** before going on to say why.

The Corinthians were Greeks in a happening city. Greeks were all about philosophy and debate and discussion. We can think of such Greeks as Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates. The Greeks liked complex intellectual discussion: they liked to be wowed by a speaker who could tie their minds into pretzels. It was standard operating procedure to be awed by the wisdom, to respect the clever, and to reward the engaging speaker.

¹ John 3:16

² Romans 1:16

As a speaker, Paul was almost the opposite. He preached simple, unpretentious sermons. This was deliberate because Paul didn't want them to go home talking about his fluent speaking skills, his funny anecdotes or the program he'd put together. He wanted them to leave knowing that they'd heard the Gospel. They were to concentrate on the simple gospel message, not on any worldly wisdom Paul may have to offer. So he kept it simple: he knew nothing among them **except Jesus Christ and Him crucified**. But besides making sure that the style didn't hide the substance, he had another reason. He **“did not speak and preach with persuasive words of wisdom but with the demonstration of the Spirit and power,⁵ that (their) faith might not rest on human wisdom but on the power of God.”** Paul wanted to make clear that faith *doesn't come by knowing or understanding*, and that salvation *doesn't come by creating some intellectual ladder to God*. He wanted faith to come, but faith is the work of the Spirit. *“Faith comes by hearing,”* Paul notes in Romans 10, *“and hearing through the Word of Christ.”* (10:17).

So Paul spoke to them the simple Gospel of Jesus Christ and Him crucified, so that the Holy Spirit may work through that Word of God with power. Sadly, he was dismissed by many for the “foolishness” of his message - that's why he had spoken earlier about how the wisdom of God - the Gospel - was *“foolishness to those who are perishing”* (1 Corinthians 1:18). A lot of people wrote him off, dismissing him as a fool, and yet, people believed: Paul wrote this letter to the Church at Corinth, to those who had heard that simple Gospel and believed.

There's a huge lesson here for the Church in our present time: salvation is about hearing the Word of God and believing it. It's not how clever the sermon is or how witty the preacher is. It's not about how lively the music is. It's not about how impressive the church building may be. ***It's about preaching Christ and Him crucified***. It's about hearing how ***Jesus has died to take away our sin***. It's about telling others the same. That's all. We do not do the convincing; we do not do the saving - that's the work of the Holy Spirit: we are just the mouth, so we must not go stepping on His toes. If at times we feel like fools speaking the Gospel, it probably means that we are doing it right: because the Gospel sounds foolish to those who do not believe. But to those who do, it is Christ the power of God and Christ the wisdom of God.

Evangelism is not about programs and emotions. It's not ambience and atmosphere. It's meat and potatoes. Actually, it's words and water, bread and wine. It's simple, blessedly simple. This will lead the world to scoff that it's just too childish or easy; of course, if the Lord made it a high, intellectual exercise, then the world would whine that it was just *too hard*.

So it's about faith in Christ and Him crucified, not wisdom. That's how Paul begins, but then he switches gears. The Gospel isn't foolishness, though he's called it that because that's how the world views it. The Gospel is actually wisdom - it's the wisdom of God.

In fact, we should probably note here that Paul isn't anti-wisdom by any means. He's not saying that people must surrender their brains at the door in order to believe in God. In fact, once or twice in his epistles, Paul quotes secular Greek philosophers.³ Sometimes, the wisdom of man is very wise, but while a lot of the wisdom of man can be very helpful, it cannot give anyone eternal life.

We Christians do well to keep this in mind. On the one hand, there will be a few Christians who seem to consider any knowledge outside of Scripture to be a worldly assault on faith: they may, for instance, consider science to be a dangerous topic because science is misused by the world to claim that the Bible is wrong. But science is the study of God's creation, one of the means by which God enriches and sustains our lives. If we need information on proper diet, we would rather read a book on nutrition than the Bible: the Lord provides one for our temporary wellbeing here and the other for our salvation. Both are gifts of God, just for different purposes. As Christians, then, we don't want to shy away from the arts or the sciences. Rather, we want to make use of them in God-pleasing ways.

On the other hand, there's the very real temptation to think that the wisdom of man will do the job of building up the Church. In its crassest form, you see this when people say something like, *“Let us change the Gospel so it's no longer that mysterious Christ and Him crucified and say it's about liberating the poor and oppressed in this world.”* Too often, though, Christians fall into the trap of believing that the Church grows because of their clever programs and sociological studies. In other words, they outsmart themselves and persuade themselves that *the Gospel isn't enough to do the saving*. Every preacher is tempted to believe that the Gospel works because of his effective speaking techniques and quick turns of phrase. Christians are often tempted to believe that they shouldn't speak the Gospel to others because they're just not good enough at speaking. We all think the Gospel needs our help.

But the Gospel is sufficient to save. It's just that the Gospel isn't like the wisdom of men. Those who are mature in faith understand this: these are not the new believers who are struggling with the basics, though they are certainly justified already by faith. These would be those who understand sin and grace, who know they're set free to do good works, who

³ Acts 17:28; 1 Corinthians 15:33; Titus 1:12

realise that the life of the Christian is one of ongoing repentance, set free to do good works. Having the opportunity to mature, they understand that the Gospel, though simple, is at the same time deep and powerful. A bride and groom are fully married on their wedding day, but then there are years of discovering each other more and more. So it is with the Christian: the Lord reveals much about Himself and His mercy, and we have the privilege throughout our lifetimes of learning more and more of Him from His Word.

However, this is a wisdom that is revealed only to faith: it's not a matter of intellect, but trust in Christ. As Paul says, “**However, we speak wisdom to those who are mature but not the wisdom of this age, or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing.** ⁷ **No, we tell about the wisdom of God in a mystery, a wisdom that has been hidden but that God ordained 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. At the time of Jesus' crucifixion, the rulers of the age included Caiaphas, Pilate and Herod. They were all well-educated, smart enough to rise to power. They had the brains, but they didn't have faith; and because they didn't have faith, they condemned Jesus. If they believed Him to be the Son of God and the Messiah, would they have called for His death? Of course not, and this illustrates the valuable lesson: *the wisdom of God is grasped by faith, not by intellect*. There are plenty of people with doctorates in theology who have outsmarted themselves right out of believing in Jesus; before God, a three-year-old who believes in Christ-crucified is far, far wiser.

This is all the work of the Holy Spirit: that's why we know and believe the wisdom of God. Paul writes that “**An unspiritual person does not receive the things of the Spirit of God. For they are foolishness to him, and he cannot know them because they are discerned spiritually.**” You and I, with our finite, sinful minds, cannot know the mind of God. The Spirit of God does, though, for the Holy Spirit is God Himself. And knowing the mind of God, He comes to us by the Word. He tells us the wisdom of God, delighting in speaking to us the news of Christ crucified. Those who don't understand it will dismiss it as foolishness; but because of the Spirit's work, we have the mind of Christ. We know the wisdom of God. We believe in Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

It's that simple. We are sinful and cannot save ourselves, so Jesus became flesh and died in our place, then rose again three days later. It's simple; but because it's the wisdom of God, the world cannot understand it and will dismiss it as foolishness. However, we don't believe it because we are simple. We believe it because we have faith; faith worked in us by the Holy Spirit. All the wisdom of this world is doomed, but we are not; for we know the simple wisdom of God that we are forgiven for all our sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Father in heaven, we who are Your children by grace pray that Your kingdom may come. We thank and praise You that You have revealed Jesus as Lord and Christ, and as King for evermore. We pray that His rule may be established from sea to sea and from the rising to the setting of the sun, that every nation, people, and tribe may confess that He is Lord, to Your glory. We thank You that, though He is King of kings, He humbled Himself and became our servant, so that He might be our Saviour, able to save all who come to You through Him.

Gracious Father, You do not enjoy seeing sinners die, but would rather see them turn from their sinning and live. Therefore spread the Gospel and extend Your kingdom among all nations on earth. Cause the mighty to bow before Jesus their Lord, and teach all people to know that there is healing and saving power only in Him.

Although we rejoice that Your kingdom is already with us, make it come with fresh power and new blessing into our lives. Make the peace of Christ to rule in our hearts, and move us to thankfulness and praise. Give us increased trust in Your Word and obedience to Your commandments. Give us grace to be humble, merciful, kind, and forgiving. Make Christ's message in all its richness live in our hearts and direct all we do and say. Grant that we, redeemed in body and spirit, may be dead to sin and alive to righteousness. Lead us to rejoice in Your grace, and to give thanks for Your mercy day by day.

We pray for Your Church on earth. Keep it from weakness and error, from unfaithful shepherds and false teachers. Protect us from heresy and division. Defend us from the lies of Satan and from the schemes of godless men. Make Your Church secure against the powers of hell. Teach Your people to be patient in hope, firm in trust, and faithful in prayer, until that day comes when You send Your angels to gather Your own into Your everlasting kingdom.

Comfort those who are cast down. Give patience to the sick, peace to the anxious, strength to the weak, help to the needy, and forgiveness to the repentant.

We pray for our nation. Forgive us for turning from Your commandments, and for living by the wisdom of men. Move more and more to trust in You and to seek You in times of need, and to give all thanks to You for the wonders of Your creation. Give to us weather that will break the back of the drought and will extinguish all the fires still burning across the land.

Pour out Your mercy on us all and teach us to set our hearts on things above, where Christ our Lord lives and reigns. In His holy and precious name we pray. Amen.

FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Isaiah 58:3-9a

³ They are asking, ‘Why have we been fasting when You have not seen it? We have been humiliating ourselves and do You not know about it?’ In fact, on the day when you fast, you find delight in it and exploit all your labourers. ⁴ Look! When you fast, you quarrel, brawl and hit with wicked fists. You will not make your voices heard on high by the fasting that you are doing today. ⁵ Is this the fast that I choose like this, that a person should humiliate himself for only a day? Is it to bow down his head like a reed and to spread out sackcloth and ashes for a bed? Do you call this ‘a fast,’ and ‘a day that pleases the LORD’? ⁶ Is not this the fast that I choose: that you should untie the chains of injustice, undo the straps of the yoke, let oppressed people go free and break every yoke? ⁷ Is it not to share your food with the hungry person, that you should take homeless, poor people into your house, that, when you see a naked person, you should cover him and not hide yourself from your own relatives?”

⁸ Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and you will quickly be healed. Your righteousness will go ahead of you, and the glory of the LORD will protect you from behind. ⁹ Then you will call, and the LORD will answer.

1 Corinthians 2:1-16

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His Spirit. The Spirit searches out all things, even the deep things of God. ¹¹ For what human being knows the things that belong to the human being except the human being’s spirit in him? In the same way, no one knows the things that belong to God except the Spirit of God. ¹² We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who comes from God, that we may know the things that God has freely given to us. ¹³ We speak about these things in words not taught by human wisdom but in Words taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who have the Spirit. ¹⁴ However, an unspiritual person does not receive the things of the Spirit of God. For they are foolishness to him, and he cannot know them because they are discerned spiritually. ¹⁵ The spiritual person judges all things but he himself is not judged by anyone. ¹⁶ For “who has known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct Him?” However, we have the mind of Christ.

Matthew 5:13-20

¹³ “You are the salt of the earth. However, if salt loses its saltiness, with what will it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled on by people. ¹⁴ You are the light of the world. A city that has been set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ People also do not light a lamp and put it under a container but on the lamp-stand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. ¹⁶ Let your light so shine before other people, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father who is in heaven!

¹⁷ “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets! I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. ¹⁸ For truly, I tell you, until the heaven and the earth pass away, one jot or one serif will certainly not pass away from the Law until everything is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore, anyone who breaks one of the least of these Commandments and teaches other people in this way will be called the least in the kingdom of heaven. However, anyone who practises and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness is much better than that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.