Wisdom, Power and Christ
1 Corinthians 1:18-31

We're looking at Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. And the passage just read to us is arguably one of the greatest in the Bible, for reasons I hope you'll see.

Now every culture tends to elevate some group of people as highly respected, who everyone else listens to, or gives way to: It might be its warriors, or its chiefs, or its sages. And today you could make a case that our western societies do that with scientists. Because science is the way to human salvation. Which is ironic, because our culture also says truth is socially constructed. Which if true would totally undermine science.

But as well as elevating people to positions of respect, there are also those we aspire to. And those people tell us what we most value or, in Paul's words here, what we boast in or glory in. It's what we most want for ourselves.

And the Christians at Corinth were so shaped by their culture - like we all are - that what they aspired to was no different from their culture. But interestingly, it's not much different from ours.

The Allure of Wisdom and Power
Look at v26: 'Consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.' And Paul highlights those three groups - the wise, the powerful, the rich - because that's who we tend to highly value. It's the same three groups the prophet Jeremiah highlights in Jeremiah 9, that Paul quotes from at the end of this passage. The kind of things we tend to boast in. The kind of people who have social status: the intellectuals, the influential, the wealthy, the well-positioned.

And Paul condenses them down to wisdom and power.

Now for these Corinthians, *wisdom* took a particular form. Look back at v17, where Paul says, 'For Christ did not send me to baptise but to preach the gospel, and not with words of *eloquent wisdom*.'

And Paul's taking aim at Greek rhetoric. Because at this time there was a huge emphasis on the style of public speaking. And speakers who were flamboyant, who maximised their oratorical powers were the celebrities of the day. And today you can go on courses to teach you how to speak in public, but back then great statesmen like Cicero wrote handbooks on how to do it. And those who could do it, and do it well, who could command their audience, weren't just highly regarded, they were thought of as *wise*. These were the people who could move people.

The problem is, it was more about style than substance. More about entertainment, than content. More about the art than the message. But it was also about social class. I mean, imagine someone today from a working class background suddenly getting into ballet or opera. What might his mates think? 'You want to watch men prancing around in tights? Or listen to overweight women screeching at the top of their voice? You're getting ideas above your station mate.' And in their day, to be into *eloquent wisdom* said something about you. This was for the higher classes. This was highbrow culture. To be a follower of these eloquent wise men, said something about you. It gave you status.

But like today, their culture also valued power. Corinth was a Roman colony, a thriving, entrepreneurial, trading centre. So power meant networks of influence, financial clout, military might. And to these Corinthians, to have power, be someone who had influence, or the money to do what they wanted to do, was appealing.

But these things are no less appealing now, are they? Wisdom, celebrity, to be in with the in crowd, status, to be someone who can stamp your will upon the world, if only for your own life or reputation - that's the way to the good life, the life you want.

But Paul is saying here that that kind of thinking is profoundly wrong, because it's not the way God has wired the world.

The Failure of Wisdom and Power

Look at v20-21, 'Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.'

In other words, human wisdom and power, the very things these Corinthians, and all of us, are in danger of idolising, are not the way to the *ultimate* good life, Paul says. They're not the pathway God's ordained for people to discover him.

You see, think about humanity's record. Left to ourselves, what do our gods look like? We either make our gods in the image of created things, or the god we make bears a striking resemblance to ourselves and our pre-existing cultural values.

And so human wisdom and power - celebrity, status, influence - are fundamentally earth-bound. They're rooted in us, in our human cleverness and pride, and not the humility necessary to encounter a God not of your making.

But our desire for wisdom and power also tries to box God in, doesn't it. Look at v22, 'For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom.' If you were Jewish, what you wanted from God, what wanted out of a messiah, was very clear. Signs. Powerful signs. They expected him to deliver them, and conquer their enemies in the same dramatic, powerful way he had in the past. The problem is that when you think you've got God figured out, and this is the way he has to do it, when he comes in a stable and a feeding trough, when he comes in the weakness and humiliation of the cross, you miss it.

But the gentile world is no better, Paul says. They too try and box God in. Just like the Jewish people, they culturally predetermined how God should do things. They inhabited the world of the philosopher, the celebrity wise man, the academic schools. So, of course God will come in ways that we think are wise, that fit with our preconceived ideas, the way we think the world is.

And so both Jew and Gentile are entrenched in their culture and cannot imagine that God would work differently.

But it's not like we've outgrown that, is it? Listen to this quote from Richard Lewontin, the American evolutionary biologist and atheist talking about the basis for scientific investigation: 'It is

not that the methods and institutions of science somehow compel us to accept a material explanation of the phenomenal world, but, on the contrary, that we are forced by our *a priori* adherence to material causes to create an apparatus of investigation and a set of concepts that produce material explanations, no matter how counter-intuitive, no matter how mystifying to the uninitiated. Moreover, that materialism is absolute, for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door.'

Or listen to Thomas Nagel, professor of philosophy at NY university: 'I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn't just that I don't believe in God and, naturally, hope that I'm right in my belief. It's that I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that.'

So whether its the pre-determined materialism of the scientist or the pre-determined desire of the philosopher that there be no God, we can create a world that closes us off to the possibility of encountering God.

Because, as Paul says in v21, in God's sovereign will 'the world did not know God through wisdom.' In other words, you'll never know God, you'll never experience him, through thinking you can sit in judgement on what he should or shouldn't do, or with your preconceived ideas of how he should or shouldn't interact with the world. If you could, if salvation and the knowledge of God were mediated through the intellectually elite, or the rhetorically brilliant, or the influential and the powerful, through the celebrities and the beautiful people of the world, they'd become the spiritually elite, and then they'd have something to boast in.

Instead, Paul says, v21: '*it pleased God* through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.' In other words, in his sovereign pleasure, God has made it so that anyone, from the lowest, to the highest, can know him through his revelation of himself in the gospel. That the ultimate good life comes not through the wise or the scribe or the debater of this age, but through faith. Not through talking or writing or debating endlessly about ideas. Not through the things the Corinthians were so sold on - celebrity and status and philosophical debate, or even religious effort. It comes by believing a message.

Christ: True Wisdom and Power
Look at v18: 'For the word [the message] of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.'

On the Palatine Hill in Rome, archeologists found a piece of Roman graffiti. It's a picture of someone worshipping a crucified man, with a donkey's head. And underneath the graffiti artist's written 'Alexamenos worships his God'. The mocking's clear isn't it? What fool would worship a crucified man? It's like worshipping a dead donkey.

Because to Romans - and a Roman colony like Corinth - there was huge stigma attached to crucifixion. Listen to what Cicero, the Roman statesman said, 'The very word 'cross' should be far removed not only from the *person* of a Roman citizen, but from his thoughts, his eyes, his ears.' It's not just that a Roman citizen shouldn't be crucified, because it was too abhorrent a punishment. It's that it's so abhorrent, so shameful, that he should never even think about it, or see it or hear of it.

So if that's what your neighbours think, or, worse, the people you aspire to be like think, it's no wonder these Corinthian Christians wanted to move on from all this talk about the cross.

Because the gospel presents us with a disgraced, shamed, abandoned, spat upon, insulted, beaten, broken, crucified Messiah. And there's nothing of celebrity or of status there; there's nothing pretty, or powerful about that. No one would go around Corinth boasting of worshipping a crucified criminal. That would have been something to be ashamed of.

It's why Paul says in v23, that though Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, 'we preach Christ crucified, *a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles*.' The Jewish people thought Messiah meant power, triumph, victory. But the cross meant humiliation, weakness and defeat. The Greeks wanted stuff that made sense to their intellectual, philosophical world-view. But a God who allows himself to fall into the hands of his enemies, to be crucified, is just nonsense. It's ridiculous that that could in some way be the way to the ultimate good life.

And if you think about it, the scandal of the cross hasn't got any less, has it? If you think that the whole idea of sin is just a social construct; or that to be told you're a sinner is insulting or a power-play; or that the idea that a man would have to die for your sins so you can be forgiven is barbaric and utterly unworthy of respect, then you're still stumbling over the scandal of the cross.

You see, the cross of Christ is the place where two irreconcilable views of reality, two views of wisdom and power, two views of what really matters in life, collide. And Paul knows that it's at the cross where real power and wisdom lie. Power not just for initial salvation - but for our ongoing salvation. Power for your life to be transformed. Verse 18 again, 'but to us who *are being saved* it is the power of God.' And v24, 'but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.' Power to enter the kingdom, and then have your life conformed to his kingdom.

Because it's there that the Son of God dies that we might live. It's there that he becomes utterly weak that we can be made strong. It's in him being shamed that our shame can be lifted. In him being abandoned that we can be brought home. In him being disgraced that we can be loved. It's in the seeming pointlessness of the cross that we can find meaning in life.

Verse 25: 'For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.' It's at the cross that God has outsmarted the wise and outmuscled the powerful. Where he brings an end to all our self-sufficiency, all our self-reliance, and all our self-promotion.

And Paul says, it's only in the cross, and not in our pursuit of status or power, that nothings and nobodies can become somebodies. Look at v26: 'For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.' Think, Paul says, about your position in life when God first called you. God didn't choose you based on the kind of stuff you're currently valuing or aspiring to. God didn't choose you because you were somethings, or a member of the beautiful people, but when you were nothings.

And it's only in Christ that a no-one can truly become a someone. If you're one of the few who does manage to pull himself up the social ladder and earn the respect or the wealth that means you can impose your will on your life, that's great, but it doesn't last. As the saying goes, the last piece of clothing you'll wear has no pockets. You can't carry influence or wealth to the other side. In the end

it'll all fall away. It's only in Christ that you can find real, lasting status. A status that doesn't depend on you. A status that tells you you are so sinful Christ had to die for you, but you are so loved, so cherished, that he did die for you. It's the cross that confers on you a dignity and a worth that no amount of celebrity or status or power or influence can ever give you.

It's the cross that tells you that you are chosen by God. Look at v27-28,: 'But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are.'

Celsus, the Greek philosopher, wrote a scathing attack on Christianity, as a religion that appeals only to fools and slaves and women. But as Larry Hurtado writes in his book 'Destoyer of the gods', Celsus wouldn't have bothered trying to warn off the social elite, who were the only ones who would read his books, if he didn't already see Christianity beginning to impact the higher classes. It's why Paul says in v26 that '*not many* were powerful' because some were. We know from Acts that one of the city's top officials, and two synagogue rulers, became Christians through Paul's ministry. And one of the unique features of Christianity was that it did appeal to both rich and poor - that it cut across these social boundaries.

And yet it's clear from what Paul is saying that the majority didn't have much social capital or influence. Yet God called them. And as you look around the globe at where the church is experiencing phenomenal growth right now, in Latin America and Africa and China, you realise God's still at it; he's still in the business of saving the have-nots; choosing the weak, the poor and the despised. Those who aren't esteemed, who don't have however many followers on instagram, who have no political power; who are on the margins of society.

You see, there's a line of thinking in the West that says that Christianity is oppressive to the poor, that it's imperialistic. But the poor and the oppressed know precisely why they believe the gospel. They know that it's in the humiliation of the cross that they are lifted up, that they're loved and chosen. That it gives them a dignity and a purpose the world refuses them.

And God does it this way, Paul says in v29, 'So that no human being might boast in the presence of God.' God does what he does to undercut all of our pride. And v30, 'And because of him [because of God] you are in Christ Jesus.' It's all his doing.

And then Paul says in v30, that Jesus 'became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption.' Christ is God's wisdom because he's your righteousness. Just think of your life: The legal case against you, that great long list of things your accuser could bring to court against you, is dismissed. In Christ you're made right with God. You don't need to hang your head in shame anymore. God sees you to your deepest point and he loves you.

He's God's wisdom because he's your sanctification. In Christ you are set apart for God, you belong to him - so your life isn't pointless. In Christ you have a new purpose.

And he's God's wisdom because he's your redemption: the term for when a slave or a prisoner of war is set free. The world tells you you're only free if you never surrender yourself to an external authority. But to believe that is to surrender yourself to a way of seeing the world. And God says,

no, it's only in Christ, in my endless love for you shown at the cross, that you will ever know true freedom, because he's the Lord who will never abuse you.

It's why Paul finishes by quoting Jeremiah 9 - let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, or the strong man boast in his strength, or the rich man boast in his riches, but, v31, 'as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

You boast, you glory in what you most value. Make it Christ - the one who makes nobodies somebodies.